Early Women's Writings in Orissa, 1898–1950

A Lost Tradition

Edited By

SACHIDANANDA MOHANTY

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In memory of

the poet, Bidyut Prabha (1926–1977)

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October 2004

Sachidananda Mohanty
Hyderabad

1

Introduction: Rebati's Sisters

Sachidananda Mohanty*

I

In the first ever short story published in the Oriya language in 1898 by Fakir Mohan Senapati, generally acknowledged as the father of modern Oriya fiction, Rebati, the female protagonist, displays a forbidden desire for learning and thereby seems to invite misfortune upon herself and her community. In Fakir Mohan's hands, Rebati thus becomes an icon; her story an allegory for female education and emancipation. The narrative marks the beginning of a new tradition and heralds a new breed of women who learned to write and created a literature of their own in Orissa—women like Kokila Devi, Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Sita Devi Khadanga, Sarala Devi, Basanta Kumari Pattanaik, Bidyut Prabha and others. By recording their moments of joy, sorrow, doubts and dilemmas in their poetry, prose, fiction and drama, they replicate Rebati's agonizing quest for education. In effect, they become Rebati's sisters.

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* See my essay 'Rebati's Sisters: Search for Identity Through Education', *India International Centre Quarterly*, New Delhi, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Winter 1994), pp. 41–52. Also by me, 'Sarala Devi: The Biplabi of Orissa', *Manushi*, No. 109, pp. 15–19; 'Educational Uplift of Women in Nineteenth Century Orissa', by Atul Chandra Pradhan, *Our Documentary Heritage*, Vol. 1, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, 1988. Also, *Indian Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, No. 196 (March–April 2000), *Focus on Early Women's Writing in Orissa*.

While the experiences of the literary women of Bengal like Rasasundari Devi, Sarat Kumari Choudhurani, Binodini Dasi and Ashapurna Devi are fairly well known, the same unfortunately cannot be said of 'the literary domestics' of Orissa, whom I call Rebati's sisters, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

By 'literary domestics', I mean those women who found themselves in a domestic setting and yet had literary aspirations. The term as used here carries no derogatory connotation. It is a statement of fact about the condition in which literary women found themselves in the middle of the 19th century. As Mary Kelly aptly explains, 'Both in their published prose and their previously neglected letters, diaries, and journals, these women reported on their own phenomenon and became unwilling witnesses to both their public events and their own private experiences'.[1]

Women's writings in Orissa date back to the medieval period and include such figures as Brindavati Dasi (who lived during the time of Sri Chaitanya), Tribhuvan Mahadevi and Nih Sanka Devi. These women, and most of their followers, wrote religious and spiritual poetry that eschewed the overtly political, including issues of women's concern. For instance, Sulakshana Devi of Tigiria (born in 1829) composed a collection of poems called *Parijatamala*. Similarly, Sujata Devi of Puri district (born in 1881) published an anthology in 1901 called *Kathalahari*, just as Annapurna Devi (born in 1883) of Chikiti in Ganjam district composed devotional songs. While such writings by women continue to exist till today, it was only during the early decades of the 20th century that several factors, such as the movement for the preservation of the Oriya language, the rise of Oriya regional consciousness, the advent of the Brahmo Samaj in Orissa, the campaign for widow remarriage, the legal abolition of untouchability and the struggle for national independence, foregrounded the literary women of Orissa into the hitherto closed public domain. The narratives of such women have an interface with the history of many progressive movements in Orissa such as the rise of female education, trade union movements and women's participation in civic and political life.

More significantly, it might be useful in this context to ask the following questions:

- What are the special merits/features of this body of writing?
- What contextual factors—history, politics, gender and culture—impinge on the generation and dissemination of this body of literature?

- How do these factors influence the reading public at the regional level? How do they contribute to the shaping of Oriya literary/cultural consciousness in conjunction with, and in contrast to, developments at the national level?
- And finally, how do we perceive the issues of aesthetics and politics, feminist historiography in Orissa and the larger question of sensibility in the context of the pan-Indian/globalized world?

Clearly, early women's writing in Orissa represents polyphonous voices. It comes primarily from the domestic context and background. Dealing with a verity of ideological and aesthetic grids, it suggests that feminist inheritance here is complex and many-sided.

II

Nineteen years after the British came to India, the first missionary schools were set up in Cuttack in Orissa in 1822. This was despite the fact that the British, according to Section 43 of the East India Act of 1813, had officially taken up education as part of their educational responsibility. Within the next one-and-a-half years after 1822, missionaries took up the management of 15 native schools in Orissa, including the English Charity School set up in 1823 in Cuttack, and which was later taken over by the East India Company in 1841 (see Box 1.1). It is important to remember in this context that the first printing undertaken in the Oriya language was the Report of the Fort William College, on 20 September 1804. Similarly, the first translation of the

Box 1.1: Notice in *Utkal Deepika*, 21 September 1871

A school has been set up in this [Cuttack] city for the education of Hindu girls. Till the construction of a separate building, instruction will continue to be imparted in my house. The school shall remain open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Some may find it hard to send their daughters due to lack of escorts. Please note that a maidservant attached to the school will pick up girls from their respective homes and drop them back after closing hours. Only young girls from respectable families can be admitted. More details can be obtained by writing to the undersigned.

—Sri Abhinash Chandra Chattopadhyay
Secretary, Cuttack Hindu Girls' School
(Translated by Sachidananda Mohanty)

New Testament into Oriya was done by Pandit Mrutyunjaya Vidyalankar, and was printed in 1809, thanks to the support of the Missionaries of Sreerampore. The Old Testament was printed in two parts in August 1811. In 1822 a second edition of the New Testament was printed. A missionary tract critiquing the Jagannath temple and an Oriya-English dictionary by Mohan Thakur were published around this time.

The steps that the early Baptists took for the education of girls in Orissa date back to 1836.[2] By 1850, a number of Baptist missionary schools had been set up in Balasôre and Cuttack. The girls in these schools were almost invariably from a Christian background.[3] At the vanguard of this movement were the wives of early Baptist missionaries. In 1834, for instance, Mrs Lacey, the wife of a missionary, wrote near ecstatically to a female friend:

> There never was such a hope-filled field of labour for a missionary's wife as now among the native female Christians and their children. The women are all learning to read as well as the children and some of each (sic.) read and understand the New Testament very well indeed. One of the female scholars is about 50 years of age and she is nearly ready to be put into the Testament class.[4]

On the other hand, given the 'prejudice' of the non-Christian 'natives' at Balasore and Cuttack, missionary ladies like Mrs Sutton regretted that it was 'almost impossible to obtain girls of respectable character' for the purpose of imparting instruction.[5]

Despite this, the work of the missionaries went on unabated and with government support, more schools and orphanages were set up in Cuttack, Pipli, Jaleswar and Balasore. The religion and social strata of the students in most such schools becomes clear from Tables 1.1 and 1.2.

Table 1.1
Social Status of the Students

Districts	*Upper Class*	*Middle Class*	*Lower Class*	*Of Known Percentage*
Cuttack	–	49	22	362
Puri	–	–	–	92
Balasore	–	130	93	86
Total	–	179	115	540

Source: *General Report on Public Instruction in Bengal, 1874–75.*

Table 1.2
Religion of the Students

Districts	*Christian*	*Hindu*	*Mussalman*	*Total*
Cuttack	399	30	4	433
Puri	92	–	–	92
Balasore	111	177	21	309
Total	602	207	25	834

Source: *General Report on Public Instruction in Bengal, 1874–75.*

The relatively larger proportion of Hindu girls in Balasore in Table 1.2 can be explained in terms of two factors. One is the initiative taken by the Zanana Association of Mrs Smith. In 1874–75 in Balasore, there were 111 Hindu girls under Zanana teaching. Second, most Hindu girls in Balasore came from a Bengali background. The Bengalis were apparently more progressive in their attitude towards female education than their Oriya counterparts.

The first systematic official steps to spread education were taken by the East India Company in 1822–23 in the Madras Presidency. In the Ganjam district, there were 225 schools with 2,977 students. Of these a mere two students were girls.

For the bulk of the Hindu girls who did not go to missionary schools, whatever education was given was private and confined to their homes. Even this was restricted, as the editor of *Utkal Deepika* astutely observed, to female members of the royalty and the upper class/caste literati.[6] Clearly, the preference of most Hindu parents was for *pathasalas* and 'mixed common schools' rather than schools run by missionaries. Not only were the former perceived as 'institutions of the country and the people', but in 1875–76, the Joint Inspector of Schools, Orissa Division, pointed out that 'it is my firm belief that the education of girls can be carried forward by means of the *pathasalas* to a degree hitherto unapproached simply because it will not be a new thing and for people who are extremely suspicious of all kinds of innovation'. He advocated a scheme where gurus would be 'rewarded' in proportion to the number of girls they taught.[7] It was a proposal that apparently found many takers.

The most significant effort towards furthering female education of Hindu girls, however, took place in 1871 when a school for Hindu girls was set up at Balu Bazar, Cuttack, in the house of one Abhinash Chandra Chattopadhyay. It was a school with a mere 13 or 14 students,

and it was named as the Ravenshaw Hindu Girls' School in 1873. Presiding over a prize-giving ceremony held on 12 November 1871, Commissioner T.E. Ravenshaw declared that the purpose of female education was not to teach the girls European manners, but to make them good mothers and efficient housewives and enable them to maintain family accounts. He regretted that the Oriyas were in this sense lagging behind the Bengalis. This fact is clearly borne out in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3
Number of Bengali and Oriya Girls Enrolled in Cuttack School

Year	*Oriyas*	*Bengalis*	*Others*	*Total*
1871	2	10	–	12
1881	4	20	–	25
1884	15	30	–	45

Source: Tabulated from *Utkal Deepika*.

Thus, by 1881, the school at Cuttack had registered just a slight growth, and it also could not catch the public imagination. The number of girls increased merely to 25. This, and the astonishing fact that even after the school had run for 10 years at Cuttack only four Oriya Hindu girls had been enrolled, were much regretted by the editor of *Utkal Deepika*, who drew the attention of parents and urged them to send their girls to school in large numbers.

Despite the many odds, the school made steady progress. Early in 1883, it was shifted from a rented building to its own *pucca* building constructed with the help of philanthropic donations. In 1884, two students—Nishamani Dasi, the daughter of Nanda Kishor Das, and Basanti Bai—were awarded scholarships on the basis of their performance in the primary scholarship examination, and by 1887, the Ravenshaw Girls' School was rated by the Inspector of Schools as an ideal girls' school in the Orissa Division. Despite this achievement, however, there was no dramatic difference in numbers, as Table 1.4 indicates.

The example of this school spread to other regions, and similar schools were opened in places like Balasore, Bhadrak and Puri. In 1881–82, the Raja of Paralakhemundi opened two girls' schools in his zamindari.

Table 1.4
Student Strength at Ravenshaw Hindu Girls' School

Year	*Number of Girls under Instruction*
1871	12
1881	25
1882	45
1883	40
1884	45
1887	60
1895	84

Source: Tabulated from *Utkal Deepika*.

Female education in Orissa was championed by both men and women. Many men wrote letters to *Utkal Deepika* in support of this cause. Reba Ray, a former student of the Ravenshaw Girls' School, became its able headmistress. She also set up the Model Girls' School, which later merged with the Ravenshaw Girls' School. Similarly, Kanaka Manjari (the Rani of Kallikote) wrote a primer for girls entitled *Balika Patha* that contained episodes from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The movement also found support in many prominent male writers such as Rathanath Ray, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Madhusudan Das and Baikunthanath Dé of Balasore. Defending the cause of female education, Commissioner R.C. Dutt said:

> Some people say that education is not essential for women. But experience shows educated women are better than their uneducated counterparts in many ways. Even by having little education, the women can keep their domestic accounts, teach their children, write letters to the dear and near ones, convey their difficulties to the elders, and spend their leisure hours by reading scriptures like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.[8]

An interesting aspect of female education in Orissa comprised a number of primers that were produced for girls of different religious backgrounds. They include *Dialogue Between Mother and Daughter* (Christian Literature, 1869), *Sabitri* (*Girls' Reader*, Dey's, Utkal Press, Balasore, 1872), *Basanta* (a story meant for women, written originally by Miss Leslie, and translated by Reverend J. L. Philips, 1873), *The Duties of Husband and Wife* by Reverend J. L. Philips, 1876, *Balika Patha* (part 1) by Baikunthanath Dé, 1877,[9] and many others. Some of the important

titles for both girls and boys that appeared in the 1860s included *Charupatha*, *Kadambari*, *Barna Bigyana*, *Sita Banabasa*, *Sisu Patha*, *Anakamala* and other general books.

Apart from Nishamani and Basanti, there were other women who distinguished themselves as pioneers of female education in Orissa. At least three of them deserve mention. They include Nirmalabala Nayak (Balasore, 1911, Honours), Narmada Kar (Cuttack, 1914, Honours and distinction), and Chandramukhi Saragi (Das) (Cuttack, 1915, Honours and distinction). Nirmalabala went to Oxford in 1920 and received a diploma in education. She and Narmada Kar are generally credited to be the first graduates of Orissa. Chandramukhi, who taught at Ravenshaw Girls' School, became the editor of *Prabhati Tara*. Soon there would be others such as Sailabala Das, Kuntala Kumari, Sarala Devi, Rama Devi and Malati Choudhury who would consolidate female education in the state.

III

A significant factor that acted as a counterpoint and often militated against female education and creativity in Orissa was the 'Conduct Book' tradition represented by what could be described as 'Advice for Women' texts. Modelled after their counterparts in Bengal, 'conduct books' by popular writers Jagabandhu Singh created and promoted a discourse which advanced a largely male-oriented agenda. It was an interesting response to westernization and female education. In the process, it often took recourse to intelligent and skilful means for pushing an ideology of female containment. Many of the rhetorical strategies employed looked, on the face of it, innocuous enough. However, presented in the conversational mode between an older male figure with authority and power and a younger spouse 'willing' to learn, the outcome was left little in doubt. It must be remembered that the internalization of the secondary status for the woman/wife takes place at a domestic site, which is probably one of the few private spaces for the young wife. The space contains simultaneously an outlet for carrying out intimate intellectual, emotional and physical/sexual interaction between the spouses. Thereby it becomes a vital site for shaping 'rightful' female behaviour and wifely conduct.

It is in this context that we may now assess the role of 'Advice for Women' texts. In Bengal, for instance, didactic texts such as *Gruha Laxmi* and *Ramanir Kartavya* focused on the desirable conduct of women before and after marriage. These attempted moral instructions,

especially wifely obedience, through elaborate conversations between a much younger and admiring wife and an older husband, carried out at night. Judith Walsh's well-documented essay 'The Virtuous Wife and Well Ordered Home: The Reconceptualization of Bengali Women and their World'[10] brilliantly records the 19th century 'Advice for Women' texts in Bengal. These texts had many parallels in Orissa as well. They enjoyed a wide currency. For instance, the 1946 issue of *Gruha Laxmi*, by the famous Jagabandhu Singh, went through an impressive five reprints. In contrast, Sarala Devi's *Narira Dabi*, or *The Rights of Women*, (Cuttack, Hindustan Granthamala, 1934), a pioneering text, had a single print. The iconography of the cover of that issue of *Gruha Laxmi* provides an eloquent commentary on the agenda of the author. The cover shows the picture of a benevolent Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity. Saree-clad, she is shown wearing a crown, and emerging from placid waters. On her right we see a young elephant, with its trunk raised in an act of salutation. The elephant here symbolizes the ritualistic presence of wisdom and auspiciousness. The presence of swans and flowers add to the overall aesthetic appeal. Goddess Laxmi carries in her two hands lotuses while the other two, held downwords, signal an act of benediction.

The portrait cleverly conflates Goddess Laxmi with the ideal housewife. The underlying idea, reiterated several times in the text, is to posit Laxmi as a source of desirable wifely conduct. In *Gruha Laxmi* part III, dated 1940, Singh explains his mission in the following words in the introduction to the book:

> Indian women are generally described as creatures confined to home. We see before our eyes the nature of education for men; female education is decidedly worse ... education in the schools and colleges is confined to a few. Beyond the text book and the syllabus, there is very little knowledge available. Girls in our country do not remain in formal institutions of learning beyond the age of 14. Therefore, they should be given such texts whereby they can enhance their general knowledge. They must know many things in order to be a good housewife. To fill such a need Gruha Laxmi has been composed.[11]

This note of hope is soon followed by an appropriate and inspiring invocation. The underlying note here is that by the reading of *Gruha Laxmi*, the heroic women of India, the great 'Ramani' of Bharata, would give birth to noble souls. May they fulfil the lofty task expected of them so that a new Bharat would be born again!

In the preface to the volume dated 1946, the author after duly elevating the lady of the house to the spiritual heights of Goddess Laxmi, holds out an appropriate warning:

> It is true that Hindu women so far have not succumbed to the lure of Alaxmi. One must ponder however, whether higher education currently imparted to women would make the continued worshiping of Laxmi possible. The day the Hindu woman refuses to accord respect to the household ideal, that will surely be the beginning of Alaxmi.[12]

Another fear of Singh is the unwillingness of a newly educated wife to enter the kitchen. As he asks pointedly: 'to relax in bed and read novels is not the duty of the wife. Alas the modern educated wife, a veritable terror at home, has begun to hate cooking. Cooking is the most important duty among all activities. For, without cooking, what shall we eat? And without food how shall we survive?' Singh's exhortations for the ideal wifely conduct soon reaches an apex. For instance, what should an ideal wife do in the absence of her husband? Singh is forthright in his message:

> There should be no use of make-up when the husband is away. Equally should she refrain from eating well or dressing well in his absence! She should find no use whatsoever in luxury items at such times. This is the 'Dharma' of a devoted wife, and for such women the husband is truly the source of all joy and fulfillment! His joy and sorrow are hers as well.[13]

Jagabandhu Singh is clear that his words are not moral sermons but are meant to be implemented in life, especially by housewives. As he explains in his *Gruha Laxmi* part II:

> Be a well-deserved Aryan woman by performing the right action, and get worshipped in the world. Nothing will be achieved only by the reading of books ... women who have the noble task of bringing forth children into life must acquire the right kind of knowledge. It is not enough for them to pass only B.A. or M.A. The knowledge that will make them the ideal wife, mother, daughter and the Laxmi of the house is what must be cherished![14]

There are many such episodes in *Gruha Laxmi* that affirm the value of the right 'education'. For instance, Chapter 3 of *Gruha Laxmi* part II alludes to the unfortunate suicide of Swarnalata from neighbouring Bengal. The wife suggests that perhaps it would have been better for Swarnalata to remain unmarried and safe. She could have studied

further, educated girls and made them ideal wives and daughters. The husband has no answer to this and quickly ends the discussion.

Given the dominant hold this kind of tradition has even today in parts of rural Orissa, the achievements of the early literary women of the state become truly remarkable.

IV

One of the pioneers among the early literary women in Orissa was Reba Ray (1876–1957). Married to the well-known litterateur and Brahmo Sadhu Charan Ray (born 1871), Reba is credited with the founding of the Model Girls' School, which later merged with the historic Ravenshaw Girls' School, Cuttack, the cradle of education for some of the leading early literary women of Orissa. The exact relationship between the two schools and the circumstances that led to the merger is yet unclear and calls for a closer look. In 1903, Reba Ray published a collection of poems called *Anjali*, and in 1904 an anthology of short stories called *Shakuntala*. She also founded and edited a literary journal called *Prabhat* as well as a magazine for women called *Asha*. Despite her pioneering role as the editor of a woman's journal, there has been absolutely no critical work on Ray, or her singular achievement in this genre at the all-India level.[15]

Reba's contributions in the form of poems and stories were frequently seen in *Utkal Sahitya*, the most prominent of contemporary literary journals, edited by Biswanath Kar. Many of her poems are deeply spiritual in nature. While gender identity is hinted at, the poems seem to carry deeply philosophical and existential undertones. Her poem *The Sound of Silence* provides a characteristic example:

In Silence I came to this world
And my life will sing unceasing.
In Silence will my life forever
Her songs of silence sing.

. . .

In silence comes the year now
And in silence now is past.
The little streams in silence
Rush along the ocean vast.

In silence bloom the little buds
And in silence fade away.
Their aching heart of pain
They bear in silence grey.

. . .

Silent, shorn of strength is woman
Beside a man forever strong
When she can't even cry for you
For fear of loud-voiced man so long

. . .

In silence, then, within my heart
This cry of silence will resound
O hark! My Lord and hark you well!
She at your feet in silence bound.

(Translated from the Oriya by Maurice Shukla)

While little is known and canonized of Reba Ray's writings today, equally negligible has been the public attention paid to another literary domestic, Kokila Devi. Sister of the illustrious author Laxmikanta Mahapatra of Bhadrak, Kokila (literally cuckoo, apparently so named because of her dark complexion) was widowed at an early age. Kokila, along with her sister Jahnavi, took an active part in the freedom struggle, in social reform and the women's movement. Abjuring her aristocratic comforts, Kokila, who was inspired by the teachings of Gandhi, chose to live in an ashram that she set up for the so-called untouchables of the village. For Kokila, social activism went hand in hand with literary creativity. Not surprisingly, many of her works record personal dilemmas and ideological aspirations. For instance, Kokila's little known but important tale *Bilasini* centres around the so-called illicit love of a widow. The narrator's attitude to the plight of Bilasini oscillates between the two poles of empathy and disfavour. The initial meeting between Bilasini and her paramour Jagabandhu clearly elicits from the narrator a note of disdain: 'I wonder how there could be so much evil in such a beautiful earth laden with fruits, flowers and creepers. How could the same earth bear bestiality where the child partook nectar in the lap of the mother?' Later, however, her forsaken state evokes a different feeling from the narrator: 'My heart was filled with great remorse. The sorrow was not just on account of Bilasini. It was for the helplessness of womankind in general'.

Not surprisingly, Bilasini's problem is resolved at Brindavan—through a sublimation of the erotic into spiritual love, a resolution characteristic of many contemporary narratives. She becomes an object of reverence for the narrator:

> My heart automatically bowed at her feet; I was stunned by what I saw. The beating of my heart stopped. After much effort I called out at once: 'Bilasini!' Tears rolled down my cheek. My voice was choked. I looked around and spotted no one. Was I awake or asleep?

Kokila's achievement in *Bilasini* lies not so much in her deft handling of the ideological and emotive issue of widow remarriage, though she clearly makes a bold frontal attack against this particular social evil. Her real skill is, however, manifests in the effortless ease with which she is able to weave in multiple styles and voices, the most important of which is the dialectic between the romantic and the social-realistic worldviews. The very opening paragraph, with its charmingly idyllic and evocative aspect of nature, is carefully offered as a sharp contrast to the reality of Bilasini's world of isolation and despair:

> The day was nearly over. The setting sun cast an unusual glow of vermilion. Hundreds of red gold lotuses bloomed on the vast empyrean. Notes of farewell resonated in the four corners. Birds returned to their nests, their parting melodies resounding in all directions. The indigo of the distant mountains gently merged into the vast azure. Soon the blue of the forests turned dove grey. Hundreds upon hundreds of birds hanging from the branches in clusters made the hollows of the trees look fearful. There was darkness everywhere. Darkness covered the heart. A dark curtain suddenly dropped. All became still and immobile ...
>
> (Translated from the Oriya by Sachidananda Mohanty)

Kokila was followed by a worthy successor named Sarala Devi. A woman who gave up her upper-caste aristocratic background and plunged headlong into the women's movement and the freedom struggle, Sarala was exceptionally gifted and had a versatile personality. She was the first Oriya woman to take part in Gandhi's Satyagraha Movement, and was jailed at Ganjam and Vellore in south India in the company of stalwarts like Durgabai Deshmukh and Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya. She joined hands with others like Sailabala Das, Kuntala Kumari, Reba Ray and Rama Devi. Travelling extensively within Orissa, she took a leading part in the Tilak Swaraj Fund and spearheaded the formation of a woman's association called Mahila Bandhu Samiti.

Virtually self-taught, Sarala mastered Oriya, Bengali and English. The bulk of her writings were characterized by a deep concern for the plight of woman in a feudal/patriarchal society. Like the other literary domestics, Sarala too saw no contradiction between a worthy home/family life and participation in the wider socio-political space. Even while in jail, she evinced a keen concern for the welfare of her 'little Tikun' and chided her husband for neglecting their child. Overjoyed at the success of the women's association of Orissa, Sarala declared:

> I feel gratified that my cherished dream of the past has been finally realised. It was truly beyond my expectation that the women of *Utkal* would one day find recognition. This is a new chapter in the history of Orissa. Which lover of the nation would not be filled with joy in seeing the raising of the woman's voice?

Sarala's literary output was truly remarkable given the fact that she had to devote time to cater to her multifaceted interests. She tried her hand at many genres including poetry, drama and fiction. However, it is mostly as an essayist and a letter writer that she excelled, and put to effective use her fiery spirit as a rebel, social activist and reformer. Some of her articles were published in Bengali journals like *Debjani*. Among her published works in Oriya are *Utkalara Nari Samasya* (The Problem of the Women of Orissa) in 1934, *Narira Dabi* (The Rights of Women) also in 1934, *Bharatiya Mahila Prasanga* (About the Women of India) in 1935, *Rabindra Puja* (A Homage to Rabindranath), *Beera Ramani* (The Women of Valour) in 1949 and *Bishwa Biplabini* (The Great Revolutionaries of the World) in 1930. As a close associate of Ananda Shankar Ray who wrote both in Oriya and Bengali, Sarala was a leading member of the Oriya romantic movement. She was one of the six authors who jointly wrote the novel *Basanti*.

In *The Rights of Women*, Sarala outlines a manifesto for women's empowerment. Comparable to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindications of the Rights of Women*, what impresses us here is her extraordinary reading into contemporary history, law and social life in India and abroad. In voicing her indignation against the subordination of women and against marital rape, Sarala emerges as a revolutionary woman far ahead of her time. Here is Sarala quoting Justice Meccard on matters like marital rape and the right of a woman over her own body and reproductive self:

> I maintain that the woman's body can never be owned by her husband. It is her own property and not her husband's. She can leave her husband

at her will; she can select her business or join the political party of her choice. She has full rights to decide whether or not she is going to have a child and at what point in time. No man can keep a woman under his control on the basis of the fact that he is married to her. The woman of this country has won independence; she is a citizen and not a slave. One does not get the pleasure of married life from the codes of rules and regulations. The success of marriage depends on mutual compassion, mutual consideration, mutual forgiveness, mutual sacrifice, and above all, mutually shared morality.

(Translated from the Oriya by Sachidananda Mohanty)

Sarala Devi's life and work remind us of the early Bengali writer Rasasundari Devi (1810– ?). The former's career parallels Rasasundari's eminently readable *Amar Jibon* that depicts writing as a forbidden political act and shows the crippling effect of child bearing and family life upon a creative-minded woman. Like her predecessor Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1858–1922) (see her trenchant views in her essay 'The High Caste Hindu Woman'), Sarala mercilessly exposes the ills of the Hindu woman and uses the English language with surprising finesse and felicity. Like the Hindi writer Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (1904–1948), she too uses religious events (as Chauhan does with *Ekadasi* in her story by the same name) for *satyagraha*/freedom struggle.

Other early literary women of Orissa followed a somewhat different trajectory depending on the circumstances of their life and the vocations they followed. For instance, many Oriya Brahmo women like Narmada and Pratibha Kar, illustrious daughters of the editor of *Utkal Sahitya* Biswanath Kar, wrote translations and adaptations of texts from Western literature, such as those by Leo Tolstoy. Narmada's pieces such as *Dwanda* (Dilemma), dealing with the virtues of religious tolerance and based on a story by Tolstoy, appeared in *Utkal Sahitya* in 1913. Later, many such stories were published in a collection called *Prasad* (The Palace).

There is much in common between Sarala Devi and another distinguished literary woman of Orissa, Kuntala Kumari Sabat, who alone can match Sarala's stature as an emancipator, activist and literary artist. Born into a Christian family, Kuntala's parents were Daniel and Monica Sabat. Kuntala's story, at once tragic and inspiring, has many noteworthy features. She spent parts of her childhood in Burma, where her father Daniel was a physician. Later in her life she practised medicine in Delhi and took an active part in the All India Women's Conference. Thus, her writings reveal the working of a composite culture and an

exile's sensibility. The evocation of the ancestral Hindu memory plays a significant part in many of her writings. While Kuntala betrays no anxiety regarding minority faith vis-à-vis the larger world of Hindu symbols, customs and folklore that populate her literary landscape, the question of faith and creativity in Kuntala's case calls for a closer study.

Kuntala wrote extensively in prose and poetry. She is undoubtedly the best known among the early literary women in Orissa, and her works like *Shefali Prati* (For the Shefali Flower) are frequently anthologized. It was poems like *Shefali Prati* and *Tara Prati* and the publication of the poetry collection called *Unchawasa* that brought her into the literary forefront. Later, she published novels like *Kalibohu* (The Dark Daughter-in-Law), *Parashamani* (The Touch Stone), *Natundi* (The Woman of Many Tongues), as well as *Raghu Arakhita* (Raghu the Orphan).

Kuntala had several seemingly contradictory traits in her personality. Her deeply sensitive nature, her concern for the plight of her land *Utkal* as well as the freedom of India, her empathy for the dispossessed and the underdogs in society, and her support for the cause of women's emancipation are all seen in her poetry and prose. At times, a single text seems to contain several such interests. She seemed to combine effortlessly the concerns of her inner, spiritual life with those of the outer world of turmoil and conflict. The best of her poetry, as in the case of *Shefali Prati*, is marked by a deeply lyrical flow and spontaneity and underlines an attempt at self-definition.

That Kuntala played an important role at the national level is evident from contemporary accounts. Her life formed the basis of a novel in Hindi called *Kalyani* by Jainendra Kumar. Despite this, sadly, Kuntala Kumari Sabat is little known at the national level today.

Kuntala had an untimely and tragic death. She died during childbirth, leaving behind a legacy that became a source of inspiration for many literary women in Orissa. There were women like Nirmala Devi and Haripriya Devi who wrote powerful poems of the inner and outer experiences. Others like Sushila Devi published partition stories like *Manisha Semane* (They Too are Humans) in the journal *Shankha* (1947). Nandini Panigrahi (later Satpathy) in the post-independence period responded to ideological issues such as the trade union movements and other progressive issues of the day. For instance, Nandini's *Chimnira Daka* (The Call of the Chimney), first published in the left-wing journal *Sanket*, depicts the poignant tale of Siba who

is forced to give up his sickle in favour of a job in a distant factory. The chimney's call, the author says, can only lead to destitution and unmitigated disaster. Yet the ending of the story is not entirely bereft of hope and optimism:

> With the limp child on his shoulder, Siba got down, and holding Phula's hand plunged into the darkness and rain. In a soft, subdued voice, Phula said, 'Shall we never return?'
>
> 'Yes, we shall one day. Only after ending the line of Masters and the saviours!'
>
> A blast of cold wind from the North drove them to the other pole of the world into the arms of millions of creatures like Siba!
>
> (Translated from the Oriya by Sachidananda Mohanty)

Similarly, literary women like Sailabala Das and Bidyut Prabha Devi lent a powerful women's voice to poetry and prose writings. Sailabala was the first woman from Orissa to travel to England for higher studies. Her account of her travels and her time in England was serialized in *Utkal Sahitya*, and her autobiography recording her political and literary life was published in 1956. Her travels made her cross geographical, cultural and political boundaries, took her across the Red Sea, the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean, and brought in for the first time to middle-class readers in Orissa a female perspective on travel and a view of colonial India as seen from Britain. Here is Sailabala describing the entering of their ship into the Suez Canal:

> Now our ship entered the mouth of the Suez Canal. From a distance it had seemed so narrow that I was wondering how the ship could negotiate it. All night the ship sailed slowly along the Canal. On either side stretched a treeless sandy expanse. Here and there the sight of carefully tended small trees brought us some relief. Late at night a half-moon rose, and in its feeble light we saw nothing but masses of sand on the banks. From time to time, we opened the cabin window and looked at the stretch of sand, for having seen only water everwhere for so many days had tired us out. At five in the morning our ship dropped anchor at Port Said. This was a beautiful harbour. After breakfast, Sale sahib, his wife, Pew sahib, his wife, and Sarala and I went by boat to see the harbour.
>
> People from several countries had made the port their home. Greeks, French, Somalis, English, Turks and people belonging to other nations lived here. We visited ships, bought varieties of fruit and wandered all over the place. We returned to our ship thoroughly exhausted. People who have undertaken a sea voyage can easily share our ecstatic joy at being able to tread on firm ground after sailing for 11 long days.

Similarly, Bidyut Prabha Devi, who wrote basically in the romantic mode, distinguished herself in poems that captured the predicament of the 'literary domestic'. For instance, her poem *The Assault* captures vividly the conflict between the reality of domestic life and the urge for literary creativity. The questions are sharp and offer an indictment of the hold of patriarchy:

Am I a bonded labourer?
Am I to be sold daily
Only for this house?
Work, work and more work
From morning till night
Tell me,
Is there nothing else
To life?

However, there seems to be little choice for the woman. For, as she says:

Writing is the balm
For all my pain
It's glory of my sorrow
Writing is rain-soaked woods
It is the music of cloudbursts
During the month of shravana

I wish I could speak of
The joy that gathers in my heart
Like a flame
In the mouth of a storm
My poetry
A luminous lamp

(Translated from the Oriya by Sachidananda Mohanty)

The use of a primarily romantic mode in creative literature did not prevent these women from participating actively in significant socio-cultural movements at the regional and national level, as is often conventionally but incorrectly assumed. In fact, romanticism often went hand-in-hand with civic and political engagement and often lent urgency and intensity to their efforts. Clearly, the single most important role played by such women was with regard to the national freedom struggle, especially Satyagraha and the Civil Disobedience Movement. Among the notable participants in this context were Rama

Devi, Sarala Devi and Malati Choudhury, all three of whom were activists-writers. Others included Sarojini Chowdhury, Hiranmayi Senapati, Godavari Devi, Janhavi Devi, Kokila Devi, Krushna Kumari Devi, Kiran Bala Sengupta, Romola Devi, Subhadra Mahtab and Annapurna Maharana. In most instances, women took an active and often leading part in these struggles. They willingly embraced hardship, courted arrest, faced *lathis* and bullets and widely participated in specific programmes, such as the campaign against untouchability, the promotion of the cause of prohibition, the promotion of widow remarriage, prevention of dowry and child marriage, the struggle for salt satyagraha and other social reforms movements that were an integral part of the national freedom struggle. Many women effectively used literary organs such as pamphlets, posters and periodicals and helped transform these causes into mass movements. Thus there was a close parallel between the personal and the political: instead of remaining isolated in their solipsistic world of fantasy and imagination, as the dominant patriarchy perhaps ordained them to do, these early literary women in Orissa participated vigorously in the public space and left their stamp indelibly on contemporary history and politics. Admittedly, such women belonged primarily to the caste Hindu middle-class families.[16]

Thus, from Kokila to Kuntala down to Nandini and Bidyut Prabha, Oriya literary women have clearly covered a great distance. In their relentless and agonizing search for meaning in life and literature, in their defiance of patriarchal orthodoxy and received wisdom, they helped build an alternate tradition of aesthetics and politics in Orissa. Like the proto-typical Rebati, they strove steadfastly after knowledge and identity and formed a sisterhood of rare distinction.

V

The story of this project is as fascinating as the lives and works of the literary women I have tried to record here. It all began during the fall of 1990 when I was on a Fulbright post-doctoral fellowship in the United States. While a guest of the poet Meena Alexander in New York City, I chanced to come across the proofs of *Women Writing in India* edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. The work was brought out by the Feminist Press, New York, in 1991. I was impressed by the enormous amount of work put in and the fresh ground that the volumes had covered. However, I was not too happy with the section on Oriya

women writers. I pointed this out to Susie Tharu upon my return. 'Well, people like you should be doing this kind of work,' she said with a smile. I decided to take up the challenge.

The opportunity presented itself to me three years later when a proposal I had submitted to the University Grants Commission at a national-level selection won me the 'Career Award'. In 1994, I shifted to Orissa in order to work on a project titled 'Literary Domesticity in Orissa, 1898–1950'.

The actual task of research turned out to be more daunting than I had bargained for. Unlike in the neighbouring states of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, in Orissa the state of Oriya language instruction and research in Oriya literature are, frankly speaking, dismal. Due to the peculiar socio-cultural and colonial experience it has gone through, the Oriya middle class has chosen to embark on a path of modernization (read Anglicization), something aptly seen in Fakir Mohan's story *Dak Munshi*, where everything Oriya, especially the Oriya language, is infra dig and must be given up for the more valorized English and Hindi.

The state of research in women's studies is equally lack lustre. The few women writers of the earlier period that find an occasional mention—barring perhaps the solitary Kuntala Kumari or Bidyut Prabha—have been relegated to the footnotes. They do not form part of the literary canon. 'Well, if they were good, they would have been there,' said one of the male critics with a patronizing cocksureness hard to match.

This glaring lack of awareness is matched by the poor state of archives and libraries in the state. It is a Herculean task to plod through dust and cobweb-ridden shelves. The Orissa State Archives and a few private collections alone have holdings that are systematically kept. I braved these difficulties and proceeded.

For my purpose, I chose to concentrate on the period around 1898. As indicated earlier, the date marks the publication of *Rebati*. The idea was not to suggest that Oriya women did not write prior to that, but that from Reba Ray onwards, literary women began to display an increasing concern for issues that related to the ideology of modernity. Thus, while texts that are spiritual and mystical in character are included, for my study the primary focus is on writings that relate to the questions of gender and female identity and the way they impact on the private and public space.

Similarly, while I have gone beyond the traditional understanding of literature and included letters and travel notes, all texts chosen hopefully make an aesthetic appeal—and have a lasting value.

I conceptualized my approach with the help of the following set of questions: What was the literary response of Oriya women to the issues and ideologies of their times? How did pioneering women editors like Reba Ray deal with success and significant failure? How did women respond, through their literary writings, to widow remarriage, the Brahmo Samaj, female education, economic emancipation, colonial domination, the freedom struggle, trade union movements and partition? How did they reconcile these concerns with the world of interpersonal love and mystical and spiritual experiences?

As I dug deeper, I learned that not only had the early literary women of Orissa left their footprints on every issue or event of consequence, they were often at the forefront of many such events/movements. They struggled against great odds, but sadly their legacy lies forgotten in the musty chambers of archives.

The texts presented here cover the distance from Reba Ray to Bidyut Prabha and Basanta Kumari Pattanaik, right up to the early 1950s. The approach is chronological. The texts selected hopefully show the linkages that exist among them and the way these literary women covered an extraordinary range of interests. I hope the assessment has been objective and not hagiographic.

Admittedly, the literary women that I have dealt with all belong to the middle class. The project, therefore, cannot claim to be comprehensive in this sense, as it does not do justice to women belonging to the other economic strata of society. There are many worlds of women beyond the purview of this attempt. Women belonging to the lower strata, as well as others like courtesans, dancing girls and *devadasis*—all of them must have written about their experiences. Hopefully, these worlds will be explored in due course by others.

We begin with Reba Ray's lyrical poem *Nirabe* (The Song of Silence), followed by an essay on gender understanding based on mutual respect. This is a message that has a continued relevance even today.

Abanti Rao's exhortation to Oriya women becomes a logical corollary. Next comes Kokila Devi's memorable tale of the world of forbidden love and widowhood. Inter-faith understanding by Narmada Kar forms the theme of the next story. Similarly, her sister Prabha Kar's chapter in a jointly written novel called *Basanti* shows an unusual

experiment by women writers who joined hands with their counterparts to write a novel.

Kuntala Kumari's engrossing texts on questions of personal love, gender identity and religion are followed by an exciting travel piece by the writer-activist Sailabala Das on her visit to England. Three of the freedom fighters—Sarala Devi, Rama Devi and Malati Choudhury—follow suit.

A large number of the texts deal with the sense of pain, anguish and desolation symptomatic of women trapped in a patriarchal order. Shakuntala Devi's *Nari*, Urmila Devi's *Emancipation of Women*, Haripriya Devi's *Woman, the Prisoner*, and Nirmala Devi's *Biraha Giti* capture this mood not entirely bereft of hope. Bidyut Prabha's *Pratighat* continues Sarala's questioning mind. Finally, we come to Basanta Kumari Pattanaik's *The Untrodden Path*, which aptly serves as a metaphor of a journey for the early literary women.

A note on the translations: the texts translated here represent a collective effort. Done by various people, they are bound to have a certain degree of variation. These variations are the result of the recognized and legitimate difference in approach among the individual translators and the way they inevitably deal with complex underlying messages embedded in the various translated texts. One hopes, however, that in all of these, the spirit of the original is retained and illuminated.

VI

The search for 'the lost tradition', I believe, is not the unique responsibility of women alone, Oriya or otherwise. It is a joint responsibility of both men and women. For, our identities are surely formed through our common inheritance of our past. Only by this understanding can 'the lost tradition' become part of our living present.

Notes and References

1. *See*, Kelly Mary. *Private Women Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth Century America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. viii. *Also see* the pioneering volumes for the Indian perspective: *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993 (first published in 1991 by the Feminist Press at the City University of New York).

2. Rev. A. Sutton. *Orissa and Its Evangelisation*, Derby (England), 1850, p. 251.
3. *Ibid*., pp. 259, 297.
4. *Ibid*., p. 254.
5. *Ibid*., p.259.
6. *Utkal Deepika*, 21 May 1881 and 4 November 1882.
7. *General Report on Public Instruction in Bengal,* Bengal Education Department 1875–76, p. 88.
8. From *Odiya Prakashana au Prashanara Itihasa Sridhara* (The History of Publications in Orissa), Sridhar Mohapatra Sharma, Cuttack: Grantha Mandir, 1986.
9. Quoted in 'Education Uplift of Women in 19th Century Orissa' by Atul Chandra Pradhan, *Our Documentary Heritage*, Vol. 1, *Orissa State Archives*, Bhubaneswar,1988, p. 60.
10. Walsh, Judith. 'The Virtuous wife and the Well Ordered Home: The Reconceptualisation of Bengali Women and their Worlds', in *Mind, Body and Society: Life and Mentality in Colonial Bengal*, (ed.) Rajat Kumar Ray, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 331–63.
11. *Gruha Laxmi,* Jagabandhu Singh, Part I, first edition, Cuttack Trading Company, 1940, p. ii.
12. *Gruha Laxmi,* Jagabandhu Singh, Part I, fifth edition, Cuttack Trading Company, 1946, p. iii.
13. *Ibid*., p. viii.
14. *Gruha Laxmi,* Jagabandhu Singh, Part II (n.d.) pp. 23–24.
15. The recently formed Reba Ray Literary Trust in Orissa is a welcome move that could throw light into a relatively obscure aspect of female education in Orissa.
16. See among others, 'The Civil Disobedience Movement in Orissa: The Participation and Awakening of Women', by Atul Chandra Pradhan, *Our Documentary Heritage*, Vol. 2, *Orissa State Archives*, Bhubaneswar,1994; *Odishare Swadhinata Sangram* (in Oriya) (The Freedom Struggle in Orissa) by Jagannath Pattnaik, Cuttack: Vidyapuri, 2001.

2

|| Abanti Rao ||

Abanti Rao was the illustrious daughter of Bhaktakavi Madhusudhan Rao, the eminent Brahmo poet of Orissa. In her address, *Abhibhasana*, meant as an exhortation for women in Orissa, she spells out the task before Oriya women. She urges them in a significant women's conference to undertake female education in a big way. For only then, she maintains, can there be a faster pace of progress for the family, society and the country. The self-image of women and arguments for her emancipation are suggestive of the times of Abanti Rao.

Abhibhasana'

To the Women of Orissa

Dear sisters,

I do not think I am worthy of the honour you have bestowed upon me by making me the president of this conference. Conscious of my limitations, I come here with a lot of diffidence. I am also aware that I have not been able to stay in touch with you, the daughters of Utkal, let alone be of any use to you and to my motherland. Besides being utterly unworthy, I am guilty of dereliction of duty as well. By calling upon this guilty and unworthy daughter of Utkal to serve the cause of the nation, you have kindled the patriotic spirit in her heart. This proves that the child has a right to serve despite her meagre strength. This is the reason why this ignoble daughter of Utkal has come forward to work with you. I must convey my deepest gratitude to all of you for giving me this opportunity.

As I sit here with you, my thoughts go back to the past. Though the past glory of ancient Utkal has been lost in oblivion, it remains indelibly imprinted in the collective memory. Women's education was in vogue during the rule of different dynasties of Utkal since time immemorial. In the royal families and in *Karan* and *Khandayat* households, girls were known to have pursued studies and learned crafts. It seems they were getting enough time and opportunity to pursue these interests since there was no child marriage in these families. Later, Brindavati Dasi and Madhavi Dasi attained fame by writing poetry. When I was a child, I had read the poetry of the poetess Sulakshana Dei. She was alive at that time. The compositions of these ancient women poets was simple, natural and tinged with a religious spirit. I do not know how things are now with the cultivation of arts in the *Karan* households or whether they are the same as I had seen in my childhood. Often human beings become indifferent to the old due to

an infatuation with the new. However, there is ample evidence of the fact that Utkal was not altogether indifferent to women's education.

As education spread in the country with the coming of the British, girls' schools gradually came to be established. The Ravenshaw Girls' School was the pioneer in girls' education in the province, and even now it retains its premier position among girls' institutions. Some of our childhood memories are associated with this school. About 50 years ago, the worthy son of Utkal, the reformist late Nandakishore Das, and my father decided to send their daughters to this school. Their daughters, Nishamani and Basanti, came out successful in the scholarship examination. The whole of Utkal is reaping the benefit of the courage they had shown half a century ago. In course of time, this school became a high school, and many students who passed from it went on to read at the Ravenshaw College. Most of the 16 graduates after passing B.T. examination have been serving the cause of education. The first lady graduate of Utkal, Kumari Nirmalabala Nayak, became the Principal of Ravenshaw Girls' School and contributed a lot to its development. This is not a matter of small satisfaction for us. The fact that the educated girls of Orissa have become pioneers in the sphere of women's education in the country is creating hope in the lives of all. The women's education conference, which was held here in the month of August, has paved the way for three more conferences at Puri, Balasore and Sambalpur in a span of one year. Educated women are making every effort to spread the impact of these conferences among women all over the country. The awakening visible today, the initiative we have taken for the welfare of the country, the collective desire to remove want from this country—all this is a happy augury. Through them the call to serve the nation and the call to women to do their duty are reaching all women. We should see in this call the sacred hand of God and offer him our gratitude.

The theme of this conference is the reform of women's education. Women experience a feeling of incompleteness, a sense of non-fulfilment at home, in society and the nation, and proceed on a path of reform: this is the aim of this conference. But who gets a sense of incompleteness? Only the one who has acquired knowledge in a subject can realize the incompleteness of her knowledge. The ignorant does not understand the limits of her knowledge. Therefore it is clear that knowledge alone propels us along the path of reform. We must first understand this truth. Needless to say, the greater the spread of knowledge among women in Orissa, the faster would be the pace

of progress for the family, society and the country. This is the reason why this education reform conference is laying so much emphasis on primary education for girls of this province. We will have to universalize primary education and ensure that as far as possible, primary education becomes useful in the later life of the girls, and they reap the full benefit of this education when they enter family life. Woman is the focal point of the family. The family grows around her. Everyone knows the plight of the family where there is no woman. Lives of many women demonstrate to what extent they can engender the welfare of the family, society and the nation when their innate goodness is refined by education and gets tested by life. God has made women and men complementary to each other. Though man works in the external environment and woman generally stays at home, their companionship strengthens one another in their respective spheres of work. In our country, therefore, woman is called the *sahadharmini* of man. The woman who is a genuine *sahadharmini* of her husband can be said to be on the right path. When I say *sahadharmini*, I mean full cooperation between the husband and the wife and their like-mindedness in all matters. Can this ideal ever be realized by a woman who remains steeped in ignorance? Though a woman is supposed to confine her activities mainly to home, though the household duties are her principal responsibility, it will not do if she chooses to remain content with this. If the social responsibilities are shouldered only by men, they are not likely to be discharged in a holistic manner. Society does not consist of men alone; women also form a part of it. Society should not be deprived of the innate qualities of women like love, forbearance, tender insight and spirit of service. How can the responsibilities of the society towards women be discharged unless women find a place and a role in it? One should not forget that behind the yeoman contribution of the great Rammohan and Vidyasagar to the cause of women, stand their mothers. Vidyasagar's mother lent her active support to social reform activities of her son. Though the influence of Rammohan's mother was not directly visible, the great reformer had inherited noble qualities from his mother by birth.

Nowadays, we are passing through a critical time. The problems of society are giving rise to unrest. Our society and country are increasingly coming under western influence. For various reasons, our old values are getting eroded. Women should extend their gracious hands to lead society along the path of peace and prosperity at a time like this. Their conscience and their sagacity should enable women to usher in

a new society by reconciling the best in the old values and the new.

The all-round development of society would be possible if women and men strive for it jointly. The prosperity and welfare of the country will not be far away if the family and society was to achieve progress. The welfare of the family, society and the nation are mutually dependent. We cannot create an ideal family if we remain indifferent to society and the country. Napoleon had said that good mothers were necessary for the prosperity of France. What was applicable to France is equally applicable to all countries. One should try to understand the deeper significance of Napoleon's statement. The crowning glory of a woman is motherhood. The progress of the nation would be assured if she lives up to the great responsibility placed on her shoulders by the almighty.

During the last one year several proposals for the benefit of the family, society and the country have been placed and approved in the conference. It is a matter of satisfaction that some of the proposals have also been carried into effect. Today some more proposals would be placed before us. I do not intend to discuss all these one by one. Let us try to approve of as many good proposals as possible and implement them. I express my solidarity with all those who have assembled here with this desire animating their hearts.

The invocation song, which was sung here today, has kindled a desire for freedom in the hearts of women. The inertia and ignorance are gradually disappearing and women are looking forward to the light of knowledge. At last, let me, for the success of the conference, pray to the almighty who is ever leading mankind from darkness to light and on to the path of greater prosperity.

(Translated from the Oriya by Aurobindo Behera. From *Utkal Sahitya*, No. 33/11.6, *Bhadra Ashwina*, 1336 Sala)

3

||Sailabala Das||

1875–1968

A Bengali by birth, Sailabala Das (né Hazra) was adopted by *Utkal Gaurav* Madhusudan Das, the maker of modern Orissa. She was the first woman from Orissa to go to England for higher studies, and later made a significant contribution to female education in the state. From England, she sent a series of letters to her father that were serially published in *Utkal Sahitya* under the heading 'Bilat Prabas'. Extremely engrossing in style, these accounts go beyond a mere travelogue and serve as a characteristic response of an educated Oriya woman to the West.

Through her writings and activism, Sailabala occupied the public space as few women of her time did. She took up administrative responsibilities of the Ravenshaw Girls' School, Cuttack, and later on served in various capacities as a legislator in the undivided Bengal-Bihar-Orissa Assembly, University Senate, public service commissions, and other public bodies. Extremely dynamic and spirited, Sailabala wrote her autobiography *A Look Before and After* (Cuttack, 1956) in English that serves as a valuable record of her life and times. A leading women's college in Cuttack today bears her name as a tribute to her many contributions.

From *Bilat Prabas*

Journey to England

Preparation for the Journey to England

My father Mr Madhusudan Das, CIE, went to England in 1897. I could not accompany him on his journey because I was waiting for the results of my F.A. examination and also because I was not clear as to why I should undertake a trip to England. But, since then, a strong desire to go to England arose in me. On occasions, when friends mentioned Indian women who had visited England, or when I read about them in newspapers, this desire grew stronger. I thought to myself that if God would ever grant me an opportunity, I would fulfil my desire to see for myself this prosperous country which had achieved worldwide fame, whose citizens had dazzled the world with impressive feats and whose manners we were so keen to emulate. This was the country that ruled our motherland.

Some business had taken me to Puri in 1906, and there I learnt from a friend that the Government of Bengal had decided to send two Indian women to England at its own expense, where they would undergo training in methods of teaching. One of these was a Hindu widow called Saralabala. Years ago I was her classmate at Bethune College in Calcutta. I had of late grown very curious to find out about the educational systems of advanced countries. I was delighted to hear that my childhood friend Sarala was going to England with this purpose. I too resolved to go there. I returned to Cuttack without delay and talked to my father about my intention. My father was very enthusiastic about the idea and generously promised to bear all the expenses of my education in England. Later it was decided that I should accompany the two ladies who were going to England and I would study in the same institution to which the government was sending them. We thought that since the government would spend a lot of money on

these two ladies, it would surely get them enrolled in some prestigious institution and ensure that their stay in foreign land would be a comfortable and pleasant one. The government would also not fail to make necessary arrangements for looking after them in the event of their falling ill or getting into some difficulties. My father said, 'I do not like sending you in the company of two women to a strange far off country. But if the government agrees to act as your guardian during your stay in England, I have no objection to your going there.'

I wrote to Sarala asking for more details. She wrote back to say that it had been decided that she herself and a Muslim lady from Bombay would go to England on a government scholarship, but it was yet to be finalized whether they would leave for England in September 1906 or in January 1907.

To ascertain the facts I immediately contacted the Director of Education, Bengal, Mr Earl, in Calcutta. He told me that no formal decision on this matter had been taken yet by the Government of Bengal. He added that even after the Government of Bengal gave its approval, further approval from the Government of India would be needed (the Viceroy was in Shimla then). It would be quite some time before government approval could be obtained. Only after this the date of departure for England would be fixed. In view of all this, it would not be possible for these ladies to leave for England before January 1907.

I communicated the purpose of my planned trip to England and my father's proposal to the Director. The *sahib* said, 'What do you propose to do after you return from England?' I said, 'My aim is to use my knowledge of methods of teaching for the education of the women of my country.' He was very pleased to hear this and heartily thanked me and my father. I made a final request, 'Sir, we are used to a warm climate. Yours is a cold country, and I have been told that winter there is particularly severe. My health is delicate. If I go to your country in winter, I am afraid, the cold might kill me. The two ladies who are being sent by the government will have to travel there for that is what the official decision is. But, if they leave in January, I may have to forget about joining them. If you kindly use your good office, you could obtain the approval of the Government of Bengal and that of the Government of India within a week and send me a cable. And then it would be possible for us to set off for England before the onset of winter. By getting used to the English climate for some time, we'll not find the winter unbearable.'

The Director accepted my suggestion. I thanked him profusely, returned to Cuttack and narrated everything to my father. Father now gave me permission to proceed to England, but not without a little apprehension. Eight days after returning to Cuttack, I was informed by the Director that our plan to travel to England had received the Viceroy's approval. The news made me very happy, and I started making preparations for the journey. I met my friends one after another and took leave of them. One of them said, 'You should not leave your old father in his present state and go to England. Two years is a long time. God forbid, you may not see him again'. I thought, 'Why am I going away from my old father? What new things will I learn over there? If I come back after completing my studies and find that my father is no more, what will I gain from my studies?' Such thoughts oppressed me. But I was solaced by my father's valuable advice. I thought, 'I have been brought up in the lap of Mother Utkal. I feel for her a deep affection. This is the land for the betterment of which my father, despite old age and failing health, is striving ceaselessly. One of the chief aims of his life is the spread of women's education in the province. I must do something for Orissa in return for his pure and unbounded love for me. If after completing my studies in England, I could help my father in a small way to achieve his noble objective, my life would be fulfilled. Almighty God never disappoints or disheartens those who plunge into the battlefield of duty leaving everything to His mercy?' This thought filled me with renewed strength and feelings of despair disappeared. I felt confident that by God's grace I would find my father alive when I came back. Trusting in the infinite mercy of the Almighty, I smilingly took leave of my friends and at 6 p.m. on 27 August 1906, my sister and I left for Calcutta by train. Many friends came to the Cuttack railway station to see my off. I cheered them up and bade them goodbye with moist eyes.

Bombay

It rained non-stop the day I left Cuttack. From Calcutta, Sarala and I proceeded to Bombay. We were accompanied by my father, brother and sister. Throughout our journey from Cuttack to Bombay we did not get a glimpse of the sun. Thus, while still in India, we had a foretaste of the English weather. We arrived in Bombay on 30 August. Our other fellow passenger Aida Fyjee, who was a Muslim, lived there. We called on her.

Fyjee invited me and Sarala to tea that day. We went to her place in the afternoon. When we saw Miss Fyjee, we got an idea about how ladies in royal families dressed themselves. She was wearing a sky blue *poshaki* saree. The gorgeous dress she had put on and the care she had taken on her appearance dazzled and fascinated me; I could not take my eyes off her. Miss Fyjee was an excellent conversationalist. We chatted for some time and took leave of her after tea.

Our ship was due to leave for England on 1st September. On the day of our departure we felt terribly depressed. We had to stay away from our country, our dear ones for two long years and live in an alien land. I would part with my old father, who had brought me from the land of my birth and had raised me like his own daughter. This thought kept tormenting me that day. Recalling the experiences of that day brings tears to my eyes even today. My father saw my tearful eyes and said, 'Shaila, if you don't feel like leaving, let's go home now!' But, finally he realized that the tears were not caused by an unwillingness to go on the voyage, but by the natural grief at having to part with own's dear ones. When he got convinced that I was firmly resolved not to let human attachments and love for my country come in my way, he blessed me and my companions and bade us goodbye, saying, 'Oh God, May your will be done! We are but insignificant creatures. Your ways are beyond us.' While taking leave of us, he said to Sarala, 'Of course, the government will do everything to make your stay comfortable. Keep me posted about how you are doing. If Shaila is ever taken ill, don't forget to send word to me immediately.'

At midday we drove to a port called Ballad in Bombay in a horse carriage. We had booked our tickets through a company called Thomas Cook. Employees working in this company had sent our leather suitcases to the ship before our arrival in the port. So we had nothing to carry except our handbag.

India was in the grip of a plague epidemic at that time. Those who travelled to England had to undergo a medical examination. A white lady doctor sat like a statue on a wooden seat and checked our pulse. She felt the pulse of lady passengers, put them into an iron cage and gave them a pass each. The relatives who came to see off the passengers had to stop here. Passes in hand, we entered the cage, tearful. Describing the feelings that came over me is beyond me. The bondless sea spread before us—our motherland and our loved ones were on one side, and on the other, an unfamiliar land and long exile. We stood in the middle, like caged animal in a zoo. Our hearts sank within us. Fond

memories of the past surged into the mind and apprehensions about an uncertain future began tormenting us.

Large ships have to stay anchored in deep sea some distance away from the shore. To board them one has to go by a steamer. After spending some time like animals in that cage, we heard the steamer bowings its whistle. I got into the steamer, holding my childhood friend Sarala's hand, and fixed my gaze on the shore as long as I could see the shadows of my dear ones standing there. That scene and the thoughts that crossed my mind that day remain indelibly printed on my heart. Like a tornado, many thoughts tossed in my mid and I lost all self-control. Hope, despair, joy, sadness, apprehension and love assailed the heart. Whenever I remember that day, the innermost recesses of my heart overflow with grief.

The Voyage

Our steamer reached the ship, which was called 'Maldavia'. We boarded it carrying our bags. Guards stood in a row and allowed the passengers into the ship after collecting the passes issued to them by the doctor.

Our ship was quite large and well-appointed. There were many servants and maidservants in it to wait upon the passengers and do their errands. They were extremely courteous in their dealings with us. When we asked one of the servants to show us the room reserved for us, they immediately took us there. Our luggage had arrived before us. This had been kept in the rooms allotted to us.

The ship has six levels. Our room was on the second level. The captain of the ship stayed on the topmost floor. All the rooms of this floor were meant for male passengers; there was no place there for women. On the fifth floor a few rooms were vacant. I persuaded the captain to let us have three rooms on that floor. Some rooms had one bed; others had two. On every bed lay a soft feather-filled mattress covered with clean milk-white bed sheets. In every room there was a small almirah, where passengers could keep their clothes for daily use. The top of this almirah could be used as a table. There was also a water tap and a small basin in the room, where one could have a wash. After washing, the dirty water would automatically drain out. There was a large mirror in every room and a small cabinet beside it where one could keep oil, soap, combs and small bottles. A small bench was put there, and there were hooks on the wall for hanging one's clothes. The rooms had to be provided with all these facilities, for the voyage

across the sea lasted far 15 long days. Fyjee occupied one room. Sarala and I stayed in one of the two rooms given to us and put our clothes in the other. I had been told that it would be very hot when the ship sailed through the Red Sea. So I got our room fitted with an electric fan. The room where we kept our clothes lay very close to the bath-room.

I took out the clothes I would need for the next 15 days from the suitcase and put them in the almirah in my room. Next, the three of us went on a tour of the ship. It was so big; it seemed like a small city. It filled us with boundless admiration for the brilliance and ingenuity of the British. On board there was a laundry, a shop selling bread, a dispensary, and a post office. Our ship was a mail carrier. The post office contained bags carrying letters sent from different countries. Several Indian and white employees of the post office opened these bags, sorted the letters, and when the ship put in at a port, offloaded letters set apart for it.

Then we went to have a look at the dining hall. Here arrangements had been made to seat and dine four hundred first-class passengers. The hall was beautifully decorated. Much thought had gone into the choice of colour for the pictures of creepers, leaves and flowers with which the wall had been painted. The wall and the ceilings were made of oak panels. Oak is popular in Britain as a building material. The dishes had been laid out neatly and tastefully on the table. The company which owned the ship in which we were travelling made sure its passengers ate well. We sat down to eat. Many types of animals and birds had been killed and cooked with English spices in order to prepare a proper English meal.

We were at a loss to decide whether we would help ourselves to the food before us or admire the gorgeously decked-out hall. When the passengers entered the hall for dinner, we looked at them trying to find out if there were any 'blacks' among them. We discovered two 'black' men, but they were utter strangers to us. Even so, we felt happy when we spotted them. After all, they are fellow-Indians. We thought that we would derive some comfort by looking at these faces when we would get fed up of seeing only White faces on the ship day after day. We now started eating. But the dishes were not at all to our taste. We chose a few that we could eat somehow, and got up, feeling discontented.

The ship lifted anchor and slowly sailed out of the harbour into the sea. The sun was about to set. I stood on the deck and fixed my eyes

on the Indian shore. The sky was overcast, the sea looked yellowish, the shore was but a line of blue, and this line melted into the horizon. Soon the Bombay harbour disappeared from view. The large waves of the Arabian Sea tossed the ship, and it was difficult to remain standing on the deck. So we made our way carefully towards our rooms and took shelter there. We lay on our beds. The other passengers did the same. When the waves toss a ship about, the passengers suffer from bouts of vomiting and head-reeling, which is called sea-sickness. Sarala and I went down with sea-sickness. Sarala had never before travelled by ship and did not know that one suffers from sea-sickness during a sea voyage. So she felt scared and miserable and said, 'Oh God, I would never have come if I had know this would happen to me.' Her words made me smile and I explained to her why she felt as she did. That night we ate nothing at all.

Every room was fitted with a calling bell. If one pressed it, the attendants would come to the passengers. I called a maidservant and said, 'We are in great agony. What should we do?' She smiled and said, 'The sea is very calm today. You need not worry about sea-sickness any more.' We tried to go to bed, but memories crowded into our minds, oppressed us and we could not get any sleep. The long night passed somehow. Next morning, the maidservant came in and said, 'What would you like to have for your breakfast?' When we expressed our unwillingness to eat anything she warned us, 'If you stay on empty stomach, you will suffer even more.' Saying this, she laid two bowls of cornflour before us and left.

The attendants brought coffee, tea and some fruit to the passengers every morning. The English passengers helped themselves to all these lying in bed and not bothering to have a wash. We never eat anything before brushing our teeth. So we got up with great difficulty, had a wash and swallowed two spoonfuls of cornflour.

Sarala had a bath that day. But, conscious of my delicate health, I desisted from following her example. She rubbed her hair with oil before taking her bath. Then, she put on a saree, and dried her loosened hair, sitting on a chair, putting her legs up. But I lay on a chair covering myself with three blankets and shawls. Sitting erect on a chair was out of the question. In the middle of all this discomfort and unease, the beauty of the big waves of the Arabian Sea never ceased to enchant us. Gigantic waves lashed the ship on all sides and rocked it. It would be difficult to describe this experience to someone who had not actually gone through it. Another wonderful sight took our breath

away. Our ship moved to a high speed. The fast moving ship tore through the sea, splitting it. Massive waves rose on either side of the ship and broke into a hundred pieces and crashed back into the sea. The sunlight reflected by the restless water formed hundreds of many-hued rainbows which charmed us. This divine spectacle brought new life into our fatigued bodies, leading us far away from the real world surrounding us. The three of us passed the day somehow, half-sitting and half lying on the deck. We felt little appetite. At night, we came back to our rooms. In this way, we spent five days of our voyage. It was not only we who suffered. Our English women fellow-passengers, too, did not stir out of their rooms during this period. A few male passengers came to the deck once or twice. They would sometimes remark to each other that the weather was fine. This made us laugh.

On 7th September, in the morning, the city of Aden rose like a faint shadow of a dark cloud against the horizon far away. Some passengers tried to get a clearer view of the city by looking through a telescope, or their glasses. Slowly, the Arabian Sea grew calm. We approached Aden. What had looked like black clouds from the distance turned out to be hills. We came across a couple of fishing boats. Even the sight of bald, low hills gladdened us after five or six days of sea voyage. Our ship put anchor at Aden harbour, where it spent only three hours. Sarala and I stood on the deck and watched Somali children dance.

We also saw letter bags meant for Aden being offloaded from our ship. Now we sailed into the Red Sea, which was very calm. Our ship rocked no more. In my childhood, I thought the waters of the Red Sea were red. But I found out that the colour of its water was no different from that of the water of the Arabian Sea. Here and there arid hills reared themselves from the water. From a distance these hills seemed to stand so close to each other that it seemed they would not allow the ship a passage. But when the ship approached them it was clear that they stood apart and there was plenty of space between them for a ship to sail through. Here we came across small fish with large wings, which shot out of the water and fell back into it after a while. Seagulls chased these. At places we saw large fish swimming in the sea.

The ship sailed smoothly across the Red Sea, for, unlike the Arabian Sea, it was calm. The passengers felt comfortable now, left their rooms and appeared on the deck. We found that there were 40 first-class passengers on the ship. These included a few *sahibs*, who were highly

placed officials in the judicial department. They were accompanied by three White ladies. We made the acquaintance of these *sahibs* and the *memsahibs*. Sarala, Fyjee Bibi, these *memsahibs* and myself often sat together and fell into talk. We got closer to the *memsahibs* and they now talked freely and intimately with us. One day one of them said to me, 'I am curious to find out if women of your country want to talk to us or socialize with us. I get the feeling that they dislike us.' I replied, 'You are absolutely mistaken. Of course, they want to socialize with you, but they hold back for fear that you may look down on them. These days people of your country despise our race so much and treat us so shabbily that we get the impression that they never want to be friends with us. This is why we maintain distance from you.'

The *memsahib* said, 'Men in your country do not treat their wives well. They shut them up in their houses, and do not let them meet with anyone else! For this reason, men in our country do not respect Indian men and misbehave with them.' I replied, 'On this matter our views will never coincide. So we should not carry the argument any further.' We changed the topic and discussed other things.

Our friend Fyjee Bibi was a great conversationalist. She had very lively imagination, and when she talked, it made us feel as if we were listening to someone telling stories. We listened to her with rapt attention. Thanks to her, our long voyage passed pleasantly.

This ship had a parlour. In it there were musical instruments, a writing desk, paper, ink, chairs and cushioned couches. Passengers came here to relax by talking and playing games. For those who wanted to read, there were two glass almirahs full of books.

There were a few Indian men among the passengers of our ship. They travelled in the second class. Two of them were going to England on a government scholarship to study agriculture. First-class passengers had to pay a bigger fare than those travelling second class. Rooms for the second-class passengers were no different from those meant for those travelling first class, but while the former were put up at the end of the ship, the latter were placed in its middle. As a result, the rooms for second-class passengers rocked harder when the ship got tossed by large waves, and the second-class passengers sufferered more from sea-sickness. Moreover, these passengers were served food four times a day, whereas first-class passengers were served food seven times a day. Passengers travelling first class could visit the second-class passengers, but the latter cold not call on the former. The rooms for first-class passengers lay on the sixth floor and those of the second-class

passengers were long and spacious. Games such as cricket, tennis and badminton were played on this. Plays were sometimes staged on this deck. We noticed that unless a first-class passenger was introduced to another passenger by someone else, he would never even talk to him. Among ourselves, when two strangers meet they take very little time to make friends with each other. But I found that two first-class passengers in the ship, who lived in the same room, and dined together, spent 15 days without exchanging a word because no one formally introduced them to each other. Ordinary people and clergymen usually travelled second class. They were not handicapped by rules of etiquette. They made an effort to know each other.

I had been told that the English ate a lot more than we could. My 15 days' experience on board the ship convinced me that this indeed was the case. At six in the morning the servants brought them tea, bread, butter, biscuits and some fruit. The English passengers did full justice to these. Then, at 9 a.m., when the bell for breakfast went off, they would proceed to the dining hall. There, on the table would be laid out rice and 10 or 12 curries made from fruit, fish, meat, eggs, and vegetable. These were to be washed down with lemonade, ice and soda. The passengers helped themselves to whatever they liked. Around 10.30 p.m. some were served beef soup and biscuits. Those who did not fancy this were served milk and biscuits. At 1 p.m. they went to the dining hall for lunch. For lunch, as for breakfast, there would be all kinds of dishes laid out on the table. Afternoon tea was served at four. The passengers could have bread, butter, semolina pudding and cakes with their tea or coffee. At seven in the evening they would again be served dishes made from fish or meat. For supper at 9.30 p.m., they had bread, butter and mutton sandwiches. Thus, they would keep eating all day whatever they fancied.

The English were highly favoured by the goddess for appetite. Those who get to see the quantity of food the English consumed will find what I say incredible. Every ship stored food for its passengers which would last for two months. The store-room of the ship resembled a small city. This would be filled from floor to ceiling with vegetables like cabbages, cauliflowers, potatoes, onions, peas, brinjals, and spinach. Readers can well imagine the quantity of vegetables required for feeding 800/900 passengers daily for two months. Surprisingly these vegetables stayed fresh for such a long period. One room of the ship was stored with ice and this room lay adjacent to the one in which vegetables were kept. For this reason the vegetables did

not rot and stayed fresh. Imagine how many cows would be needed to get milk for so many passengers! And how much space and how much fodder would be needed for a herd of cows on board for two months! But the clever and sharp-witted English had found a way around this difficulty. When the ship left the shores of England, big cans filled with milk were kept buried in ice. Frozen milk stayed absolutely fresh for two months. Milk, which goes sour in two hours if it is not boiled, remains unspoilt for two long months, thanks to the ingenuity of the English.

In our country, we do not bother to change our clothes when we eat. But for the English, this simply is not done. No matter where they find themselves—at home, abroad or on board—they must change into something before they have a meal. At 6.30 p.m. a bell would go off and the English passengers would go to their rooms, change clothes, comb their hair and come to the dining hall.

Arrangement in the ship for bathing were very convenient. In a ship carrying so many passengers, one did not get more than ten minutes for a bath. There were separate bathrooms for men and women. In the bathroom there were three tubs, one containing hot sea water, another, cool sea water, and the third, cool fresh water. One could take a bath in whichever tub one liked. The time for baths was from early morning to 9 a.m.

The ship had its laundry. The bed sheets on the cots, the sheets placed on the dining tables, serviettes and towels were the property of the ship. The ship's washerman washed a thousand of these every day. If passengers gave him something to wash, the charges was eight *annas* per piece. The washerman returned it the same day.

In case someone died during a voyage, there were arrangements for giving the deceased a Christian burial. Ghouse *sahib*, former commissioner, Orissa, and Harold *sahib*, the collector, had both passed away at sea. Their last rites had been performed on board. The ship had a carpenter, who would make a coffin. The dead body would be placed inside it. The ship's pastor, or the captain, if there was no pastor on board, would pray for the deliverance of the soul of the departed. To make sure the coffin sank to the bottom of the sea, a heavy iron ball would be placed in it before it was sealed. Then the coffin would be slowly lowered from the ship by means of ropes and dropped into the sea.

On Sundays, Christian passengers could offer worship to the Lord. The service was held in the dining hall. A bell would ring at 11.30 a.m.

Passengers would assemble in the hall. Second-class passengers were allowed to take part in the service. Although all English men and women were Christians, it was surprising that many remained absent on this occasion.

The English are a fun-loving people. A life without fun and entertainment would be simply inconceivable to them. A voyage lasting 15 days weighs on their minds, and to divert them, there were arrangements on board for all kinds of amusements and entertainments. Placing bets and gambling were a great source of amusement for them. Songs, musical instruments, theatre helped them pass their time pleasantly during the voyage.

Many Indians were among the employees of our ship. Every Sunday, all the sailors and employees had to be present before the captain. The sailors, dressed in white pyjamas and shirts and a red handkerchief tied around the head, stood on one side in a row; on the other stood the employees dressed in white pyjamas and *chapkans*, wearing a red turban. They numbered around 200. A high official would blow a bugle. The captain would arrive after the service. The sailors and the employees would salute him and then go back to their places of work.

After spending three days in the Red Sea in this manner, we reached the Suez Canal on the 10th of September at midday. The ship dropped anchor. Two doctors, a French man and a French woman came on board to carry out a check-up of the passengers. All of us (the first-class passengers) assembled in the dining hall. The chief functionary of the ship called each passenger by name. The passenger walked past the doctors to the deck. The doctors left, satisfied that there were no ailing persons among the passengers.

Now our ship entered the mouth of the Suez Canal. From a distance it had seemed so narrow that I was wondering how the ship could negotiate it. All night the ship sailed slowly along the canal. On either side stretched a treeless sandy expanse. Here and there the sight of carefully tended small trees brought us some relief. Late at night a half-moon rose, and in its feeble light we saw nothing but masses of sand on the bank. From time to time, we opened the cabin window and looked at the stretch of sand, for having seen only water everywhere for so many days had tired us out. At five in the morning our ship dropped anchor at Port Said. This was a beautiful harbour. After breakfast, Sarala and I along with Sale *sahib* and Pew *sahib* and their wives went by boat to see the harbour.

People from several countries had made the port their home. Greeks, French, Somalis, English, Turks and people belonging to other nations lived here. We visited ships, bought varieties of fruit and wandered all over the place. We returned to the ship, thoroughly exhausted. People who have undertaken a sea-voyage can easily share our ecstatic joy at being able to tread on firm ground after sailing for 11 long days.

As it was, I was very weak. The cold suddenly gave me acute backache, and I took to bed. I found turning over to my side extremely painful. Finding me in such agony, my friends feared that I would die. Fyjee Bibi ran to the ship's doctor and said, 'Miss Das is dying!' The doctor was having his meal. He hurriedly got up and rushed to my cabin. However, he found that there was no question of my being given a burial in the sea. He said, 'The pain will be severe. It has to be endured.' The doctor did not charge a fee. (They get paid from the fare paid by the passengers.) The friends I had made among the passengers came to me daily as I lay bedridden and expressed their sympathy. The ship left Port Said. On 12 September we entered the Mediterranean Sea, and into a world dominated by Europe. The air grew colder, and one had to put on warm clothing before coming to the deck. The sea was now a deep blue. As we sailed past the coast of Italy, a beautiful scene greeted us: Italy on one side and Sicily on the other; the hills were full of houses, cultivated plots and vineyards. We could even see the bridges across some Italian rivers.

Leaving Italy and Sicily behind, we sailed though the Strait of Messina and re-entered the Mediterranean Sea. The ship sailed due west. The Stromboli Island (it has a volcano) loomed like a dark cloud in the distance. The next day, on 13 September, we came near this island at 3 p.m. The hill rose very high. There was a huge orchard at the foot of the hill, and a crater on its peak. After spending two days in the Mediterranean Sea in this manner, we reached Marseilles on 14 September in the morning.

London

When I returned home, my friends asked me, 'What was London like?' I found answering a question like this difficult. Just as a bird living in a small nest on a little branch of a tree growing on a mountainside will not be able to answer the question as to the total area of the mountain, I found the question impossible to answer. One can get an idea of the size of the mountain when one looks at it in a picture; but an attempt

to form an idea of its size while standing on a certain point on the mountain will lead nowhere. But, since buildings and human beings do not figure in a map, it is hard to get the full picture of the city. Look up at the vast sky. It is covered with clouds. There were places where there are no clouds.

. . .

There is a saying that no one has seen the beginning and end of London. At first sight, the saying seems untrue, but facts bear it out. London is expanding day by day; at its outskirts new settlements come up every week. London has become the centre of commercial, academic and political life of the country, and with the help of science all things needed for leading a good life and for achieving happiness are getting concentrated here.

Trains here constantly run underground, but the railway stations lie above ground. Hundreds of people get out of these and, coming up, pour into the river of humanity flowing along the main roads of the city. If you want to get some idea of the crowd passing through London daily, you will do well to remember crowds assembled during a national festival in our country. But unless one pays a visit to London, one will never get a clear idea of its roads. I came here once to see for myself the roads of the city. Everything seemed to be in a state of perpetual motion; vehicular traffic, pedestrians, shops, houses, theatres, the parliament. Wonderstruck, I thought, 'In fact, these people belong to a royal race. What seems plenty to us is but utter poverty to them.'

London is assailed by fog in the month of November. This fog is of two types, black and yellow. When black fog descends on the city at midday, gas lamps are lit immediately in order to illuminate the city. Midday takes on the aspects of midnight. However, black fog is not harmful. When this fog hangs overhead, one feels night has set in, but people go about their work as usual and no one comes to any harm. The yellow fog, however, is extremely dangerous. The English call it pea-soup. If it finds its way into someone's windpipe, he can get suffocated. In this fog gas lamps are of no use, for it blots out everything. So all traffic and movement of people on the roads come to a dead halt. People have to stop and wait wherever the fog overtakes them.

The English in India and the English at Home

From my father and my friends I had learnt that the English who lived in England and the English one came across in India belonged to two different races. In other words, anyone who had socialized with the English at home would find that the English in India had little in common with them. Since I mention two races of the English, I must differentiate between them. Let me explain.

There is no need to talk at length on the English in India, for highly placed Indian officials who serve as lowly clerks daily endure insults from them. Nothing I say will add to what they already know. They may praise the English to their face, but deep at heart they resent the treatment the English mete out to them. However, writing about the English in England is necessary, for domestic women and others do not know anything about them. What I write is applicable in a general way; exceptions do occur. It is generally observed that the English, until they step on the Indian soil, retain qualities particular to their country of birth. But, when one sees the way they conduct themselves in India a few days later, one wonders how the qualities which had survived a long sea voyage across 6,000 miles, disappeared so suddenly. If we look deeper, we would realize that the fault lies with us. If we had been self-respecting and if we talked to the English as equals, they would never lose their national character. When they go home, the *sahibs* become well-mannered once more and they would never treat or address their servants the way they treat or address highly placed Indian officials. This is because even the servants and maidservants in England are a self-respecting lot. I will give you an example.

An incident during my stay in London helped me to form an idea of the importance servants attached to self-respect. I was at the time staying in a rented house, where a few servants and maidservants worked for me. One day, my chief maid came to me and said, 'Five servants and maidservants have informed me that they have decided not to work for you and that they would leave.'

I said, 'But why?'

The chief maid said, 'I don't know. Please call them over and find out. I won't be able to do anything alone. So, if they leave, I will also go.'

I called one of the maidservants and asked her to tell me why they were leaving. She said, 'We find it inconvenient to work here. So we have decided to quit.'

I asked, 'Do you have any complaints about your food or accommodation?' (In England, the employer has to provide his servants board and lodging.)

She replied, 'No. But we don't want to work at a place where we are not treated with respect!'

I enquired, 'Who does not treat you with respect?'

She said, 'Your Indian servant never asks for anything but always demands it! This offends our self-respect. We can't work here.'

On enquiry, I found that, instead of saying, 'Please do this!' my Indian servant always said 'Do this!' This was against the rules of etiquette.

Hearing this, I thought that if the highly-placed people in our country, not to speak of servants or members of the middle class, display this self-respect, our country will never be subjected to tyranny.

Why this incident involving servants in England left such a deep impression in my mind will be clear if I explained how they lived here. England is a cold country. So I need hardly emphasize that everyone there needed a house to spend the night in. Servants in England are more wretched than beggars in our country, for the latter have at least a hutment where then can shelter themselves. Servants in England have nowhere to stay except in the house of the employer. Moreover, unlike in India, servants in England cannot change employers at will. While seeking employment they have to produce a letter from their former employer. Therefore, my servants and maidservants knew quite well that they would not get a job elsewhere if they did not get a letter of appreciation from me. There was another rule to be observed in these matters in England: a servant must inform his employer one week before leaving his service if he was quitting on his own. The same rule applies if an employer wants to dismiss a servant from service. If this rule is breached, the employer or the servant, as the case may be, has to pay one week's wage to the other.

According to this rule, my servants and maidservants gave me 75 rupees, a week's wage, and left. This incident should convince you that no one would be treated with disrespect in a country where even servants were possessed of such a high degree of self-respect.

It is perfectly possible for a deputy or a clerk in our country to give up his job and his service, but this is not an option open to servants in Britain. I have said earlier that the English in India and the English

at home are two different races. When the English in India return home, the English in England would not socialize with them. I have been charmed by the civility, selflessness and the kindness of the English at home. If I had not been treated with such generosity and courtesy by them, I would have found it impossible to spend so long a time there far away from home. One example would illustrate their deep concern for others. While studying in Cambridge I was staying with a good English family. One day I saw the mistress of the house and her niece busy writing a letter each. When I went up to them, they told me that there was an island called Tristan and Acuptia, the inhabitants of which received letters only once a year. These letters reached them through a ship. The day on which this ship arrived there the islanders ran excitedly and happily to the post office. But there were some on the island who had no one outside who would write letters to them. My landlady and her niece were writing letters to two such persons living on this island. After they finished writing the letters, they wrote on the envelope the following message: 'This letter is meant for one who has no relatives outside!' The letter said, 'Don't think you have no one you can call your own in the world. On a small island like England there are some who pray for you.' A letter like this gave me evidence of the high-minded generosity of the English. Our countrymen would have achieved great deeds if they could behave in this manner with their neighbours. But they are so busy safeguarding their self-interest that they have no time to do anything for their own country or community, let alone another country. Rather, they would not desist from saying unpleasant things about someone engaged in doing a good deed.

One can easily appreciate the difference between the English at home and the English in India by contrasting the behaviour of those in England who write letters to complete strangers to bring them happiness with that of people from the same country who come to India and treat Indians rudely. I will give another example which shows how the English treat their servants at home. I once stayed with the sister of a rich English Lord as her guest. One day she said to me, 'We are all going to spend the day elsewhere. Today, my maidservant is getting married. Since she does not have a house of her own, I am letting her use my house for a day. She will celebrate her wedding in the company of her friends and relatives.' I was amazed. This incident should give you an idea of the noble-heartedness of the English.

I have been treated so well by everyone in England, the rich, the poor, gentlemen and people belonging to the lower orders, that I feel nothing but affection for them. During the cold, sunless day of winter, when the heart pines for one's homeland, it is their love and kindness given freely and ungrudgingly, which has sustained me.

(Translated from the Oriya by Jatindra Kumar Nayak. From *Utkal Sahitya*, No. 12/2, *Jyestha*, 1311 *Sala*, pp. 41–45; No. 12/3, 1315 *Sala*, pp. 71–81; No. 13/1, *Baisakha*, 1316 *Sala*, pp. 1–7)

'Janasadharanre Streeshikhya Bistarara Upaya'

Ways of Spreading Women's Education

We feel the need for women's education in our society these days. This need is felt by both the rich and the poor. We are witnessing a new awakening all over India, and people in the villages too are clamouring for women's education.

In 1854, for the first time, the government felt the need for women's education; but during the last 62 years or so, no satisfactory progress has been made in this direction. Even now, the ratio of boys and girls receiving education is 5:1. Of course, we must gratefully acknowledge that if the government had not intervened, the state of women's education would have remained stagnant. But for the government's efforts, whatever little improvement has been recorded would not have been possible. Still, it should be made clear that for girls' education the government has not done even one-tenth of what they have done for the education of boys.

The education for women and girls is an important matter. Social customs, caste system and religion have further complicated the issue. I shall not waste much of your time by discussing all these details. The topic of our discussion concerns finding out ways of spreading women's education among the masses. We shall also discuss how the government can fulfil the need for women's education and how the existing system can be reoriented. There is a movement for women's education in the whole of India. A few aristocratic British ladies and gentlemen supporting the cause of women's education met the secretary of Indian Affairs in this connection last year. On 31 December last year, when we were in Bombay, a meeting of women was organized and a memorandum was submitted to the Viceroy. We are glad that these movements have drawn the attention of the government to women's education, and letters have been sent to provincial governments asking them to find out what is wrong with the existing system. The Government of India has admitted that women's education, as it

exists in our country today, is not as systematic as it should be. Those who do not give proper attention to it may think that all is well with this education, and that no improvement is called for. They do not admit that there are any flaws in it. However, they do not receive public sympathy or support.

Women's education cannot make progress in this country until the Department of Education gets the cooperation and support of the people. The education of women depends largely on the support of the general public.

The Education Committee set up in 1882 was of the opinion that the various impediments to women's education cannot be removed unless popular opinion is taken into account. So it would not do to ignore public opinion. But the education department has so far paid no attention to it at all. In a country characterized by religious diversity, caste differences and different social customs and habits of mind, it is not prudent to impose a uniform method of primary education on all the provinces. One may think that a uniform method may work in countries where these obstacles do not exist. Although the same obstacles do not exist in England, a uniform system is not adopted even there. Schools often choose their own syllabi. The reason is that the method of education is determined according to the local conditions, and for this reason the method enjoys popular support. Although we all live in the same province, diversity exists in our social customs and manners. In spite of this, primary education is regulated by the same rules framed by the education department and implemented in Bihar, Orissa and Chhotanagpur. But it is heartening to observe that the Government of India has taken note of this. We quote an excerpt from the letter of the Government of India addressed to the provincial government in this regard:

> There is no doubt that it is generally supposed that girls in India can read, write and do arithmetic in their mother tongue. But, to teach other subjects apart from these, co-operation of the local people is to be sought; their help and support will be essential for the progress of education. In this situation, the Education Department should not decide the topics and force them on the schools. The Education Department should set a few topics and the local committee, with or without the advice of the Department, may bring about necessary modifications and select the topics. Since the spread of women's education is the avowed aim of the Government, there should never be any obstacle to selecting the topics to be taught, according to need. (*Contents translated from the Oriya*)

It is apparent from the quotation that the Government of India has at last realized the faults with regard to the spread of women's education. Therefore, they desire to entrust the local committee with the task of selecting topics. In our humble opinion, instead of choosing the same topics for all schools, if the task of selecting is left to the local committees, and more schools are set up for different categories of girls, women's education will get a boost and the general public will extend their cooperation and support. Education department should not try to introduce *purdah* in places where it is not necessary. The general public understand the system of segregation of the sexes better than the authorities. This system is not at all necessary, at least in the primary schools of Orissa. Those who understand the system know that girls are not kept apart from boys till they become 9 or 10 years old. Again, this practice is in force only in the higher social classes. There should be a large number of schools in the rural areas to teach reading, writing and arithmetic to girls. It will be nice if a girls' school can be set up in each village. If that is not possible and parents raise no objection to their daughter's reading in the same schools with boys, the education department should not create any difficulties. Those who have the experience of the locality and those who are aware of local needs should be left in charge of selecting textbooks. Instead of doing that, if the job is left to persons lacking experience, it will be impossible to impart the necessary education.

When there was a discussion on women's education last February, a member suggested that, if people were not satisfied with the existing system, they could make their own arrangements for themselves; they should not expect anything different from what they were getting from existing schools. They should accept the system in which teaching was imparted. The general public could not be depended on for choosing between the right and wrong. But it is good that the Government of India considers it differently, and instead of depending on the education department, they were in favour of entrusting the local committees with the task of deciding the type of education to be imparted in their area.

We regret that we have no time to talk in detail about the subjects of study for different types of primary schools in different places and societies. In order to do so, it is necessary to know the minds of people who belong to different communities and support the cause of women's education. A separate essay will be needed to discuss the subjects of study in primary and other schools. I shall conclude my speech after

telling you something about education at middle and high school levels.

There are very few middle schools in Orissa. The number of high schools is still smaller. Most girls studying in these schools do not respect caste distinctions. Very few Hindu girls study in middle schools. To some extent, child marriage is responsible for this state of affairs. But in our opinion, if the textbooks for middle classes has been selected taking public opinion into consideration, many Hindu girls would have read in these schools. The instances of Mahakali Pathsala and Central Hindu Girls' School at Benares may be taken as examples. Thousands of girls, who observe caste distinctions, study in these two schools. The organizers of these schools have selected subjects of study relevant to Hindu society and even they do not follow the rules of segregation.

As it is necessary to choose different topics for girls belonging to different classes of society, it is also essential to select subjects of study in a similar manner for middle schools, taking the local needs into consideration.

Separate schools may be set up for girls coming from societies adhering to the caste system and for those not respecting the system. Topics relevant to the society from which the girls come may be selected. For example, Hindu girls generally do not sit for university examinations. The Hindus mostly think that it would be enough for their girls to get trained in household works. The following excerpt from a letter sent to the Provincial Government makes it clear that the Government of India has clearly realized this:

> Girls should get such type of education as would make them trained mothers, who know rules of health care, bring up children, feed them properly, know how to control them and treat them when they fall ill; they should also be trained in managing the household. (*Contents translated from the Oriya*)

If there are no financial constraints, a large number of middle schools should be set up in every district, taking the local condition and needs into consideration. English should be taught as a second language in these schools. Provisions should be made for teaching music and religion, wherever necessary. Almost no Hindu girl studies in high schools these days. There are three girls' high schools in our province: two of them in Bihar and one in Orissa. The educated Hindu society is passing through an age of transition. No longer do Hindus support

child marriage. If they support middle and high schools, they will certainly appreciate the efforts of the government and send their girls to schools. If necessary, *purdah* schools may be set up for girls who observe the caste system; they may be taught subjects most suitable to their social condition. Christian and Brahmo parents have realized the need for educating their daughters. Moreover, all the girls of these communities are not interested in university education. Some girls nurse the ambition to get a university degree; others want to become experts in household chores; a few others are interested in social service. Special care needs to be taken in teaching girls who belong to certain categories and live in certain places. There is one high school in Orissa. Girls studying in the six higher classes normally do not observe caste distinctions. If the education department intends to follow rules of segregation, they must establish separate schools for those who do not respect caste distinctions. In order to enlist popular support for *purdah* schools, the government must also select the subjects of study accordingly.

There are no colleges for women in our province. Nor has the time come for requesting the government to set up such a college. But we believe that a women's college will be established in Cuttack in the next three to four years. If there are only a very few educated girls who do not object to studying along with boys, they should be allowed to pursue their studies in the local college. If college classes are opened in high schools, it will not be enough to arrange a couple of lecturers for each subject instead of appointing qualified regular teachers. Much cannot be expected from these lecturers. If a women's university is established in India, it will determine the subjects of study for girls. The education department should note that the life of a woman in the East is not the same as it is in the West. Something which will be accepted as real education in Western countries will not enjoy popular support in the East. During our stay in Bombay, we learnt that the women of that province are more educated than women in other provinces. Their parents, however, are not happy with that. Educated women move in high society; they have formed a *purdah* club whose membership extends to 700. Men can visit the club once a week and mix with women. Here women receive the same type of education as the women in the West. But parents in the East do not support this type of education.

Education of girls at middle and high school levels should be managed keeping two things in view: (*i*) teaching in the student's

mother tongue; (*ii*) formulating methods keeping in mind that the works and duties of women in society are quite different from those of men. One, who makes an objective assessment must recognize the necessity of these two things. Teaching at the primary, middle and high school levels should be done in the mother tongue; the sooner it is done the better it will be for the nation.

The second one is more important. We do not intend to say that the door should be totally closed to women who want to compete with men in getting recognition and government jobs. Those who can earn distinction by virtue of their mental and physical strength can bring glory to themselves in society, but we must remember that for the greater good of society and the nation, women should have a different place in society in relation to that of men. If teaching is done through the mother tongue and subjects of study are determined taking the needs of women into account, we do not think there will be any dearth of students. If honours and titles are conferred on women, girls will be more interested in their studies. Many girls enter the universities for degrees, not for education. We must look at the Women's University of Japan as a model, while determining the syllabi of middle and high schools. We have greater similarities with Japan than with the West. The Women's University of Japan became so popular that women aged 30–35 years got themselves enrolled in schools and colleges and wanted to obtained degrees. Our country will be benefited if we follow the footsteps of Japan. It will not be difficult to select textbooks for lower and middle classes, following the Japanese model. Topics can be selected from the existing books till proper textbooks are made available. In short, where there is a will, there is a way.

The existing method should not be rejected outright while selecting the subjects in the aforesaid manner. The syllabus to be adopted in the new high schools can be prepared taking care that it is not totally different from the existing syllabus. The courses of study should not be incomplete for those who intend to marry after completing high school education. For them, the courses should be complete as far as practicable. And for those who intend to proceed to college for higher education, their study in school should serve as a stepping stone. Moreover, the subjects of study should be chosen in such a manner that two year's hard work should make one eligible to appear at the Matriculation examination of the university.

This is an excerpt from Sri Edward Maclagan's letter addressed to provincial governments.

> As joint families are disintegrating these days, stability and security enjoyed by widows in such families are also disappearing. Although, according to convention, widows were compelled to live under the control of others, they enjoyed certain privileges. Now-a-days the conventions are breaking down and the privileges are disappearing. (*Contents translated from the Oriya*)

Child widows can read in schools, get higher education and work as teachers in high schools. But it is necessary to set up training schools for aged widows. In 1909, when the Government of Bengal moved to establish a training school for Hindu widows, the Hindu community opposed the move. With great difficulty three Hindu widows could be motivated to come to the training school; an amount of Rs 600 to 700 was spent on their account. The plan has become successful. It is a matter of regret that there is no training school for Hindu widows in Orissa. We expected that the education department would establish such a training school in Orissa in 1910. But our expectations have remained unfulfilled since the new province of Bihar–Orissa was carved out. A proposal about setting up a training school has been submitted to the education department in 1914, but unfortunately our proposal did not get the approval of the authorities. Those who know the history of Ravenshaw Girls' School must be aware of the fact that if the local officers had succeeded in their designs, the present girls' school would never have been established. However, if the education department had overruled the objections of the local officers and accepted the proposal submitted to the department, by now a training school would have been set up in Cuttack. We are glad to know that the matter has come to the notice of Government of India and we hope that we shall soon have a training school in Cuttack.

We also need here a school for industrial training. There are women belonging to various castes, who are not eligible for any training; but there should be some means for them to earn their livelihood. They will very much appreciate such a school.

We would like to speak a few words now about teachers. However organized the management of the school may be, attendance of the girls who respect the caste system depends to a large extent on teachers, textbooks and the functioning of the school.

Teachers must discharge their sacred duty in teaching the girls. They should also understand the minds and hearts of the parents. It is essential on their part to get the support and co-operation of parents. Actually, teachers must know the parents of their students intimately.

Then only will the Hindus send their girls to school without hesitation. It is unfortunate that some lady teachers do not consider it proper to know the views of the guardians or to come in close contact with them. If teachers hold this view, the spread of education will not measure up to our expectations. Lady teachers must assume the role of mothers. If they maintain a cordial relationship with the people, women's education would get the support and co-operation of the public.

We have maintained that girls' education depends heavily on textbooks. The education department should be careful in selecting such books. Since it is not possible to know the views of the local people, local committees, on the directions of the Government of India, should be entrusted with the task of selection of such books. It is felt that better books can be prescribed in place of the existing volumes. However, it may be inferred from the letter the Government of India sent to the Provincial Government that women's education has a bright future. The directives of the government could be certainly extended for help and co-operation towards the promotion of female education.

Translated from the Oriya by Arun Kumar Mohanty. From *Utkal Sahitya*, No. 20/2, *Jyestha*, 1323 *Sala*, pp. 73–80.

From *A Look Before and After** Autobiography

Chapter II
Railway Activities: Journey from Calcutta to Cuttack

More than 50 years ago, there was no direct railway communications from Calcutta to Cuttack. In 1898, B.N.R. was just beginning to start the railway bridges. Before the train service, we used to come to Cuttack by seagoing vessels and steamers. The first train ran from Kolaghat to Jajpur Road Station. Passengers to Cuttack used to come by steamers from Chandpalghat to Kolaghat. Once I was coming to Cuttack. I left Chandpalghat by steamer and came to Kolaghat. It was the month of May and very hot. I was dressed very simply in a plain white sari and had on a pair of slippers. My *khansama* and an *ayah* were travelling with me. I found four Englishmen and two English ladies travelling in the same steamer for Cuttack. The *khansama* of the steamer came and asked me if I would have my lunch after or before the '*saheblog*' as they would not have lunch with me. I smiled and said I wanted no lunch. We arrived at Kolaghat where a train was waiting on the field. There was no building or proper station except a *kutcha* house. Seeing the mentality of the Europeans in the steamer, I felt that I would have some difficulty in getting a berth in the first-class compartment. So I sent my *khansama* ahead with my bedding and asked him to spread it out on a lower berth in the first-class ladies' compartment. It was eleven o'clock in the morning and very hot. The train was a long way off and I asked my *ayah* to follow me with my luggage and I got into the compartment before the others. In the meanwhile, the *chaprasis* of the European officials brought down the

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* Excepts from the autobiography by the same title (Cuttack, 1956), written originally in English.

luggage of their masters. Seeing me in the compartment, the *chaprasis* said, '*Memsahibs* would not like to travel with a native woman.' Another said, 'Let us wait till the *memsahibs* come.'

In the meantime, the *memsahibs* arrived with their husbands. The *chaprasis* told their difficulties and why they had failed to put the luggage in. The gentlemen got quite red in the face, sent for the guard and asked him to turn the native woman (me) out and to tell her to travel in the third class. The guard was more polite and had better manners than the Englishmen, who happened to be officials of Cuttack. The guard came to me and asked me to show him my ticket, which I did. He went back to the gentlemen and told them that I was a first-class passenger and he had no right to turn me out. I did not mind being called a 'native woman', for I am a native woman and am proud of it. But the way and the tone in which they uttered it seemed like an insult, and I wanted to punish them. I told my *khansama* to change the two third-class tickets to first class, and when he brought the tickets I sent for the guard and asked him to lower the upper berth of the other first-class compartment where two other European gentlemen were sitting.

As this was the first train taking a trip to Jajpur Road, many gentlemen from Cuttack were also travelling to Cuttack by it, and also an Indian regiment bound for Madras. They all stood in rows before the train to watch the fun and to see who won the battle—whether a lonely native woman or the Europeans.

I told my *khansama* to go and sit on the upper berth of the next compartment with the Europeans. The man was reluctant to do so. I threatened to leave him behind if he failed to take his seat. So he went and sat on the upper berth with his legs dangling down and smoking a *biri*. My poor Madrasi *ayah* was made to sit on the opposite berth of my compartment, leaving sufficient room for the ladies to share the berth with her. Seeing my activities, the European gentlemen got desperate and felt their position most humiliating when watched by hundreds of natives. They asked the guard again to turn us all out and make room for the Europeans. The guard advised them to wait for the station master, who arrived just then. They told the station master to turn the native woman out, who must be only a third-class passenger but was travelling in first class. The station master came to me and saw the three first-class tickets. He asked me why I had changed the two servants' tickets to first class. I told him how I was insulted by the Europeans and so I wanted to teach them a lesson. They would not only have to travel with a native woman, but a native woman's servant,

as they are servants of India. The station master laughed and said, 'Serves them right!' Then the station master went to the European gentlemen and said: 'Sir, they are all first-class passengers and I have no right to turn them out. Please take your seats as the train will be off in five minutes' time.' He then gave the signal to the guard. The *chaprasis* were staggered to see the helpless condition of their masters and mistresses, whose pride was lowered to the dust and they were made to travel not only with a 'native woman', but with her servants.

The other passengers, seeing my victory, saluted and cheered me and went into their respective compartments. The two English ladies asked my *ayah* to sit on the floor. My *ayah* was trembling and wanted to leave her seat, but as my eyes were on her, she had to sit where she was. The European gentlemen rushed into the other compartment and sat down on the lower berth. The wife of one of the gentlemen shouted out, 'Alec, Alec, my dear, see the feet of the native servant dangling just above your head.' Mr Alec left his compartment and came running into our compartment. I called for the guard and asked him to turn the gentleman out as it was a ladies' compartment and I strongly objected to his travelling in the same compartment with me. So he was turned out.

At Kharagpur, the gentlemen came to their wives and told them who I was, having found it out from my servant, and said that in India no one could have done what I did, and I did it because I was the daughter of Mr M.S. Das.

They got down at Balasore and I came home by a steamer. I told my father what had happened. He did not approve of my putting the servants in the first-class compartment. A few days later, these officers came to the Cuttack Club and they were found to be the district magistrate and the district judge of Cuttack. They were members of the club. Some of the members knew about this incident and spoke to them about their rude behaviour to me. They said they did not know I was the daughter of Mr M.S. Das and apologized to Mr Das for their behaviour. After that, we became quite friendly, and many a time they laughed over the incident with me and paid compliment for my courage. Thus an unhappy affair ended happily.

Chapter III
Entry into Jagganath Temple

At the beginning of this century, Puri was very different from what it is now. There were hardly any houses on the beach, except for a few

official bungalows. My father rented a house in Puri and I used to go to the place now and then with my friends. In 1902, some friends came and stayed with me in Puri. It was the time of the Car festival and there was a gathering of a big crowd of pilgrims. The crowd was greater than usual as this was the occasion of 'Naba Kalebar' for Jagganath.

Two days prior to the Car festival, my Hindu friends wanted to see the pilgrims and the temple and took me with them. We arrived in front of the Sun Pillar of Jagganath temple at 10.30 in the morning. Several *pandas* surrounded us and my friends got down and asked me to do the same. I refused. The *pandas*, looking at me, said, 'Mother, why don't you come with us?' In reply, I said, 'Do you know who I am?' All of them said, 'Yes, you are Madhu *babu*'s daughter.' I said, 'I am a Christian. How can I enter a temple, for it is not allowed?' They argued with me and persuaded me to come with them. Without giving a second thought to the matter, I went inside the circle, formed with joining of their hands, in broad daylight though I was known to the police and the *pandas*. At their request I went with them. They took me inside the main temple, and I felt I was doing no wrong. The priest offered me holy water and flowers, but this I refused to take and came out and stood on a platform looking at the pilgrims and listening to the solemn music and singing. Seeing me standing on the platform, one *Babaji* of Cuttack recognized me and cried out, 'Madhu *babu*'s daughter is inside the temple! It is polluted!' The pilgrims were enraged and some thrashed the *pandas*, who came running to me and asked me to say that I was not the daughter of Madhusudan, but belonged to a doctor's family. I refused to tell such a lie and disown my father. I scolded the *pandas* for having brought me there. There was great commotion and I felt very nervous and regretted having entered the temple. I asked the sub-inspector of police, who was there and whom I knew, to take me out of the temple. He came with half a dozen policemen and brought me out of the temple, and I saw the district magistrate and the district superintendent of police on horseback with a dozen policemen in front of the Sun Pillar. Seeing me, the district magistrate got down and asked me, 'What led you to enter the temple, Miss Das?' I was told by him that as soon as I got inside the temple, the sub-inspector of police ran to him and informed him of my entry. They got so nervous and worried that they came away at once, without having their breakfast. He also said that if the mob had killed me, they would have been powerless to save my life. I did a wrong thing in entering the temple, and he did not know what the consequences would be.

Returning home, I felt uneasy and sent a wire to my father to come to Puri. The next day, my father and the commissioner of Orissa arrived. In the newspaper of Calcutta, it appeared that Christian ladies had entered the Jagganath Temple and had sneered and jeered at the idol and that Hindus were not safe from Christians even inside their temple. Pilgrims were greatly infuriated and a mob rising was feared and so on. A telegram arrived from the Government of Bengal to the district magistrate asking him what force was required to put down the riot. The officials were greatly troubled. I had a very bad time with my father, and was asked by the district magistrate to write out a report of how and why I entered the temple and what actually happened. That report was sent to the Government of Bengal.

My father went to the Raja of Puri and asked him whether he knew about my entrance into the temple. The Raja replied, 'Yes, it was with my knowledge and consent that your daughter was taken into the temple. As soon as your daughter arrived at the Sun Pillar, one of the *pandas* ran and told me about it and asked my advice. I thought many people entered the temple who were not supposed to do so. I therefore gave permission to your daughter to go inside the temple thinking no one would recognize her in the crowd. Besides, she is your daughter. You saved our temple and the honour of the family and certainly we could not say "No" to your daughter'.

My father felt very bad on hearing this and then went to the high priest, who also said, 'I know about your daughter's entry to the temple for I had asked the *pandas* to take her. She is your daughter. How can we say "No" to her? If she wishes to enter again, we shall allow her.' My father was very much distressed, for he felt I had abused his influence and taken advantage of it.

In the local papers, it was out that when the Lord of Hindustan (meaning Lord Curzon) wished to enter the temple and promised to pay all the expenses of the repairs of the temple he was not granted permission, yet a Christian girl had been allowed to go in.

The poor *pandas* were fined. The temple and *bhog* were purified. Poor Jagganath had to bathe again and had fever. So there was a few days' delay in his departure to his Aunt's house.

The car festival was put off for two days. It was a great lesson to me, and since then I have never entered a temple or mosque, not knowing what might come of it.

Chapter IV
Legal Activities

First Woman Honorary Magistrate in India

It is interesting to know that though Orissa in 1924 is backward in many respects to other provinces in India, yet on some questions of women's uplift movements, she has given a lead to India.

The credit is due, I am proud to acknowledge, to a woman of Orissa.

One day in 1925, I read in some newspaper about women honorary magistrates of Madras and Bombay. I did not know at that time that they were only justices of peace and had no actual power to try any case. I said to myself, 'Why should not our province have an honorary magistrate?' To think was to act. I at once saw the late Dr Sachhidananda Sinha, the then finance and judicial member of the executive council of the Government of Bihar and Orissa, in connection with the question of honorary magistrate. He asked me, 'Do you wish to be an honorary magistrate. If so, I can make you a real one.' I said, 'Certainly, I would like to be the first honorary woman magistrate in India.' I was appointed in 1925. I ranked in equal status with the stipendiary magistrates in Patna. I first had third-class power, and after six months of my appointment, I enjoyed the power of a second-class magistrate—and tried all cases that are triable by a second-class magistrate. I refused to sit with any male stipendiary magistrates from the beginning in order to learn work, so I sat alone. I had a furnished courtroom, a retiring room, and bathrooms. A clock was put up on the wall of my room. I had a bench clerk and a *chaprasi*. Some months I worked 22 days for four hours a day when second-class magistrates were on leave. In one year, I tried 575 cases dealing with Indian Penal Code and district board, municipality, railway, motor vehicle, police, and other by-law cases. Fifty per cent of my judgements were upheld in the Patna high court, and 25 per cent of my judgements were modified, and 25 per cent in IPC cases were set aside. I worked like a stipendiary magistrate to show the government that a woman was also capable of doing executive services just as well as a man. Even when I had third-class power, I tried the cases of juvenile offenders by the order of the district magistrate. That was the privilege I enjoyed from the very beginning of my appointment.

The first day when I took my seat in the court, I felt quite an important person, seeing that lawyers were in my court. I did not feel

nervous or show my ignorance in law. I was determined to learn from them in trying by-law cases. I found that poor people were often prosecuted, whereas the gentry escaped from being punished. I asked the prosecuting officer one day, 'How is it that poor men are always prosecuted? Do not the rich commit the same offence? If they do, then why are they not prosecuted for breaking laws? Are they exempted?' He said, 'No, your honour, if you give me the orders, I shall have them prosecuted.' I told him that he should do his duty irrespective of persons.

Chief Justice Fined

One day, I went to the house of the then chief justice. The wife of the chief justice told me that the police was becoming a nuisance and did a most daring thing in stopping the car of the chief justice in front of the Kotwali police. She asked me in an aggrieved voice, 'Have you ever heard of such an incident anywhere?' I laughed and asked her, 'What was wrong with the car?' She said, 'There was nothing wrong seriously, only one of the lights was bad.' I asked her, 'Why are you finding fault with the police? It has only done its duty.' She asked, 'Did you give the orders?' I replied, 'Not exactly to stop the chief justice's car, but all cars that break the rule of the Motor Vehicles Act.' She laughed, very much amused, and said, 'You wicked person, you wish to punish the chief justice?' In reply, I said, 'I will consider it an honour to punish him—for it is a privilege that no one will ever have.' She asked, 'Is the Chief to stand in the box of the accused in your court?' I laughed and said, 'Oh, no, but if he does, it will enhance the importance of my court. Send your driver and it will be alright.' Then she asked me, 'Will you fine him?' I said, 'Yes, *if* he admits his fault. He will be fined the maximum since being the chief justice he should know the law.' Just at this time, the chief justice came in and said to me, 'I am glad that you have plenty of courage. You will do much good in the town,' and paid me a great compliment.

Censure of District Board Chairman

I shall narrate a few more incidents of my activities for you, my readers, to see that during my honorary magistrateship, though I punished my friends, officials, and non-officials, yet none of them ever showed any displeasure. On the contrary, I was appreciated by them and they encouraged me to do my duty on my various activities, wherever the government was pleased to appoint me. During my

court life, I found poor people really harassed by the rich and suffering the most. Here, I shall give you an example. A very poor man was prosecuted by the chairman of the district board for occupying district board land. The accused was so poor that he could not engage even a *mukhtar* to take up his case. I took pity on him and made a local investigation and by referring to old maps and other documents and making old people of the locality as court witnesses, I found that the rich man's claim that was supported by the chairman, was false. As the case was instituted by the district board, I ordered that the compensation of Rs 60 should be paid to the accused by the chairman of the district board, and made the chairman responsible for compensation in order that in future better care may be taken and a proper examination of the evidence available be made if a case should be examined by the chairman before he sanctions prosecution. This case created a great sensation. The district board went up to the high court—but lost the case. I was overjoyed when I came to learn about it.

My Daring Action in Connection with Civil Disobedience Movement Prisoners

During my stay in Patna, I did many daring things, but not as daring as that which I am going to narrate here—and I escaped from being punished.

One day in Patna, I was asked by Mrs Hassan Imam to come to her house immediately. I went there and found the room full of influential Congressmen of Patna, who asked me, 'What has occurred in the jail this afternoon?' I replied, 'I do not know anything.' Mrs Hassan Imam said, 'You are a jail visitor. You should know what is happening there.' I said, 'My duty was to visit the jail once a month to see the female prisoners. So naturally, the daily happenings in the jail are unknown to me.' Then someone said that I must find out what happened in the jail that afternoon because they saw the police and military entering the jail that afternoon and soon after, heard the report of firing inside the jail. They thought that many of their relatives, who were arrested and in the jail, were killed, and I was asked to bring some information about them and their safety. I explained to them why it would be impossible for me to bring them any news as I would not be allowed to go to the men's side. They would, however, take no excuses from me and thought I was the only person who could get some correct news from the jail by seeing the political prisoners myself and so must help them.

Something within me stirred and I decided to take up this job and do something. I said, 'Very good, I would try to do it, even if I am arrested.' Next morning at 9.30 a.m., I entered the jail. The outer compound of the jail was full of motor cars, *ekkas*, and a crowd of people. They cheered me as I entered as the news had leaked out that I was going to the jail to find out all about the firing. The jailer was there, and I asked him to come with me to the female ward. We went together. I told him that I would also like to go to the Congress prisoners and whether he would take me to see them. He emphatically said, 'No!' I did not worry him further with any questions or requests. During my visit to the female prisoners, I gathered from the jailer the position of the tents of the political prisoners, and after leaving the female ward I made my way towards them. The jailer got nervous. He was watching my movements. I first went to the carpet department and from this to the oil department. Then I went straight to the Congress camp with the jailer. He was greatly troubled and did not know how to stop me from visiting these prisoners as it would mean his dismissal from service. I, however, paid no heed to his pleadings, but just walked on. When the Congress people saw me, they came out of their tents and cheered me saying, 'Miss Das ki Jai.' They were greatly surprised to see me there with the jailer. They stood around me and I asked them to tell me what had happened in the jail the previous day and whether there were any casualties among them. The jailer forbade them to answer any question of mine. I told them not to obey the jailer but to tell me frankly all that happened as I had to tell their friends who were anxious and wanted to know the truth. The poor jailer was dumb-founded at my daring, but could do nothing. The prisoners said there were no casualties, and I asked for the cause of the firing in the jail. They said that when the superintendent came to visit them, they refused to say 'Sarkar Salam', only saluted him. This enraged the superintendent and they were asked to keep to their cells the whole day. They refused to do so, but they were forced to, and in trying to do this, the police used *lathis* and fired some shots. Several of them were injured, but no one had died. I spent about 10 minutes with them and gathered the information I required. The jailer was greatly disturbed and was actually trembling. I told the jailer he could only forcibly eject me by an order from the magistrate and I would take the consequences, but must gather the information I wanted before leaving the jail. I asked him to take me to the hospital where the injured men were. He refused, but followed me silently. I assured him that

I would take all the responsibility of my action and that he would not be dismissed. I entered the hospital and found 20 injured men bandaged and in bed. The injuries were not serious. They also told me the same story. I scolded the students for breaking jail rules. I asked them whether they were comfortable, and when they said they were, I left them and came to the office. When the office window was opened, I found 2,000 people waiting outside. I came out, stood on a platform, and told them that there were no deaths but only slight injuries as a result of yesterday's affair. They then quietly dispersed, believing my statement.

I came back to the office and phoned the Hon. Judicial Member, who was an Englishman, and asked to see him at once to speak to him on a most important matter in connection with the jail. He told me to come at once. When I entered his office, he smiled and asked me what the matter was. I narrated all that I had done that morning inside the jail, how I had disobeyed the jailer and gone against his repeated requests. I said that I knew there was great excitement in the city and there was fear of a disturbance unless they had some authentic news about the happenings of yesterday. At the request of influential Congressmen, I promised to bring in news and pacify them, and with my bold action I managed to pacify the crowd outside the jail and sent them away quietly. Then I said that as I had broken the rules, I was ready to face the consequences, and requested him not to punish the jailer for my action.

He smiled and said, 'Miss Das, you have done a most daring thing. No man would have done what you did, and I, on behalf of the government, thank you as you have managed to avert serious trouble by the mob.' So ended my activities.

Think and tell me, my readers, can I or anyone else dare to break the jail rules? Congressmen never thanked me for the daring work I did for them, whereas the then government made me a jail visitor so long as I stayed in Patna. What a difference?

. . .

Meeting with the Mahatma

That night, my father, Mahatma*ji*, his secretary, and some others were sitting on a carpet in our drawing room and talking. I was also present there. Mahatma addressed me and said, 'I came specially to Cuttack as your guest, for I want a favour from you.' We looked the surprise

we felt. Then I said, 'I will certainly do what you want me to do if I am able.' He said, 'In Patna, in Calcutta, and even in Cuttack, those who know you have told me that you are the person who can help me, so I want your help.' I said, 'I am much honoured because of your confidence in my ability, but I am sorry I cannot give you my promise until I know the nature of the work and of my ability to do it.' But he was adamant and said he was sure I could do it for him. He said, 'I want you to take up *charkha* and introduce it to the ladies of Orissa.' With folded hands, I begged him to excuse me as I would not be able to make it a success. He asked, 'Why can you not make it a success, when everyone says you can?' I answered, 'Unless I put my whole heart and soul into the work, I cannot make it a success.' He asked, 'Don't you believe in the *charkha*?' I said, 'No, the *charkha* will never bring salvation to India or solve its economic problems. But it is good for the cultivators. They can grow cotton in their own fields and can make their own *dhotis*, sarees, and *gamchas*. But the middle and rich classes will never take to it.' Then he asked me again, 'If you do not believe in the *charkha*, why are you wearing a *khaddar* saree?' I replied, 'You are our honoured guest. I do not wish to appear before you in any saree which will be repugnant to your eyes.' He asked, 'Am I to understand that you will discard *khaddar* as soon as I leave your house?' I said, 'Yes.' He kept quiet for a minute or two. Everyone present was surprised at my boldness. Then Gandhi*ji* said again, 'Very well, now I shall ask from you another favour. Will you do it?' I said, 'Unless I know what it is, it is very difficult for me to say whether I shall do it or not. I cannot deceive you by saying I will do a thing which I never intend to do.' He then stretched his hands and said, 'Give me all your sarees.' I said, 'Please excuse me, I am sorry to refuse you again. For I know you will burn all my sarees. I do not wish to make a bonfire of my sarees. They have not hurt me, and my lifelong policy is 'Waste not want not'. He said, 'I shall give you a dozen fine Bezwada sarees every year as long as I live.' I said, 'I am sorry, the proposal does not tempt me. If you are so anxious not to use foreign things, why are you using motor cars, medicines, watches, etc.? They should be discarded by you. But under the circumstances, we cannot do so.' Gandhi*ji* did not like my answers. He said, 'In ancient India, a host and hostess would give anything to a guest, and you cannot give your sarees to me.' I said, 'We are not in ancient India. Our ideas have changed under British rule and we have adapted ourselves accordingly. We are used to so many things that we would find it difficult to give them up. If you want me

not to buy any foreign things, I am willing to promise.' Gandhi*ji* did not appreciate my remarks. He turned to my father and said: 'You hear how your daughter talked to me.' Then he addressed me and said: 'I want you to become a member of the Congress.' I said, 'I shall be pleased to become a Congresswoman when I shall believe in Congressmen and Congress policy. I shall let you know, and come to your ashram at Sabarmati.' I asked him to pardon my bold remarks. He left our house the next evening saying that I would be welcome to his ashram whenever I come, but I never had the pleasure and honour of being his guest at his ashram.

4

|| Reba Ray ||

1876–1957

Poet, editor, and educationist, Reba Ray is easily one of the best known 'literary domestics' of Orissa. Along with her writer husband Sadhu Charan Ray, Reba Ray was a pioneer of female education in the state. Niece of the illustrious *Bhaktakavi* Madhusudan Rao, she was the founder of the Model Girls' School, which later merged with the historic Ravenshaw Girls' School, Cuttack. Her published works include *Anjali* (1903) , a collection of 40 poems, and an anthology of short stories called *Shakuntala* (1904). Writing poetry from the age of 17, she founded and edited a literary journal called *Prabhat*, and a magazine for women called *Asha* (1892). Sadly, Reba finds little mention in the Oriya literary canon today. The journals she edited are practically non-existent. In all her works, Reba combined an interest in gender identity with larger philosophical and existential concerns. Deeply lyrical and moving, many of her poems and short stories appeared in *Utkal Sahitya*. 'The Sound of Silence' is a characteristic example. Widowed at the age of 22, Reba Ray passed away on 7 August 1957.

'Nirabe'

The Sound of Silence

1

In silence I came to this world
And my life will sing unceasing,
In silence will my life forever
Her songs of silence sing.

2

In silent sky the crescent moon
In silence floats she by,
She sings her glory as she glides
In silence smiling, high.

3

The youthful sun at daybreak
In silence from on high
Sends rays of streaming sunshine
To silence-beats of sky.

4

In silence, rising, gentle clouds
Across the sky they waft,
And stars in their deep-blue dwelling
Yearn on in silence soft.

5

In silence comes the year now
And in silence now is the past,
The little streams in silence
Rush along to ocean vast.

6

In silence bloom the little buds
And in silence fade away.
Their aching heart of pain within
They bear in silence grey.

7

In silence does the birdlike soul
Live out her life in body's nest.
Then leaving next behind in silence
Files out on a moment's crest.

8

In silence blooms the louts flower
And longs for the sun at dawn.
Caressing him from far in silence
And from afar, longs on.

9

In silence bloom upon my days
So many hopes, forever rife!
In silence so much I express
Thru' wordless silence the speech of Life.

10

In silence blessing me with love
In silence grows He near,
Him I hope to find one day
In silent seeking hard austere.

11

His nectar-words so sweet are they,
Into my life in silence sink,
And fill it with exceeding sweetness
To a divine and blissful music link.

12

In silence do I give myself,
My life, into his hands to keep,
In silence, on! Forever in silence
He draws me to his bosom deep.

13

In silence when it's time to die,
Will Death hold me in warm embrace,
In silence will I go,
Of friends or kin will leave no trace.

14

In silence I will go one day
Into the womb eternal merge.
My cry will be the cry of silence,
The others' cry, a mournful dirge.

15

In silence Lord, O life of mine,
In dwelling in my life, supreme,
In silence you bring me up,
My husband's Lord, I deem.

16

Silent, shorn of strength, is woman
Beside a man forever strong.
When she can't even cry for You
For fear of loud-voiced man so long.

17

In silence, then, within my heart,
This cry of silence will resound.
O hark! My Lord and hark you well!
Is she at your Feet in silence bound?

(Translated from the Oriya by Maurice Shukla. From *Utkal Sahitya*, No. 20/5, *Bhadra*, 1323, pp. 231–34)

'Jeebanara Udyesa Stree Purusha Ubhyankara Eka Heba Uchita'

Men and Women Should Have Common Goals in Life

The aim of life consists in realizing higher goals. Every human being pursues some aim in life. God has created human beings as the most evolved creatures. He has endowed them with intelligence and knowledge to enable them to know what they should do and what they should not, and to help them define the goals of their lives. By virtue of that intelligence and knowledge, human beings are able to determine their future course of action. As their mind develops, their goals and aims are decided with the help of their intelligence and knowledge. They consider it their chief task to achieve that goal as the principal way of attaining happiness and peace in life.

Many people think of the goals of their lives in different ways. Some take earning money as the only goal and work for it all their lives. Some take the acquisition of knowledge as the sole aim of their lives and pursue it. Some others take bravery as their goal and annihilate innumerable human beings throughout their lives. They seek to prove their strength and value in this manner and feel that their lives have been fulfilled.

But neither wealth, nor reputation, nor position—nothing is permanent in this world. It is a mistake to base ourselves upon something that is not eternal, that does not do any good in this life and in the life after death, and that does not bring any good to the soul, which is the higher goal of life. Often, we do not know the real aim of our life and wish for transitory pleasures offered by the world. Consequently we undergo pain and suffering. Many a times, we advance a little in order to do some work, and if we meet a small obstacle, we consider our lives as futile. But, it is utterly absurd to think that a developed being like Man should take leave of the earth, eating and enjoying for some

days the transitory pleasures of the world like an animal, without performing any higher deed. There are obstacles at every step in this world. Life is a mixture of joy and sorrow. You cannot get happiness without enduring sorrow. In this world, only a person who performs his duties, overcoming barriers and obstacles, is really happy and enjoys a peaceful life.

This life is a terrible struggle and the world is a battlefield. If you want to be victorious in life's struggle, you have to be determined and have to stand in the battlefield displaying courage, striving hard, holding the sword of duty. God has endowed us with knowledge, a capacity for knowing what we ought to do and what we ought not, and given us strength in our hearts for our striving, enthusiasm and determination. But, though we often know our duties, we refrain from performing them. Even if we know our duties and start any work, it comes to an end in a couple of days. The reasons for it are the weakness of our heart and lack of determination. We have to surrender ourselves to that omnipotent God in order that the weakness of our heart would disappear and we would be firm. Only a human being can solely devote his life to the achievement of his goal by becoming firm, overcoming impediments and enduring sorrows and sufferings with patience. He can realize that the chief aim of life is to perform righteous deeds. The main purpose of life is to dedicate ourselves to the causes of noble deeds, laying our minds at the feet of the Supreme Being who is the embodiment of all ideals.

Those who do not possess disinterested love for God and selfless and pure love for men and women of the world, can never enjoy real happiness. On the other hand, in this world, the life of one who has learnt to love all beings, high and low, who embraces the whole world with love, resting his mind at the feet of the benevolent Lord of the Universe and who is always eager to attain nobility, generosity and largeness of heart in life, is praiseworthy. He knows the real purpose and goal of life.

What is the goal of life, I ask. Not only men but women should also have this goal. If they had the same goals in life, it would become easy to achieve the goals. Both nurses and doctors are essential for a patient's recovery. Even if he receives treatment from a good doctor, his treatment would be of no avail if the nurse lacks intelligence, knowledge, affection and patience. Similarly, it is not that a man cannot achieve the goal of his life without the help of a woman. But he can never attain wholeness unless two different things work together. If humility is

coupled with devotion, purity is combined with love, and generosity with honesty, a great beauty gets manifest. Similarly, men alone may try their best to do good to the world, but their work cannot attain perfection unless women assist them. Nobody should think that a woman is necessary only for procreation and worldly life. This is not a modern idea. Even the Aryans who belonged to the ancient times, stated, 'Both of you, O husband and wife, perform religious deeds, attuning your hearts to the Brahma!' And, as a priest uttered this great mantra, he offered the bride to her groom. The *rishis* had laid down the rule that no bachelor could perform a libation/*yajna* or funeral rites and similar deeds. Here I cite another sentence from the scripture: 'Whatever religious rites you perform, do it together with your wife.' I cite two more *shlokas* to explain that a woman is necessary not only for giving birth to children and enjoying conjugal life, but also for assisting in higher deeds. 'Today the two of you are united by a sacred conjugal bond by the will of God. You perform religious deeds together for the sake of winning the love of that God.' 'You two wholeheartedly surrender yourself to the supreme God, devote yourself to the cause of the good of the universe and live an indivisible life for eternity.'

Indeed, without a woman's participation, neither religion nor any other work can attain perfection. A country is undeveloped when her women lack knowledge and religion and they are inactive. On the other hand, a country is progressive where women are knowledgeable and religious. As a work cannot be done properly with one hand, neither a woman nor a man can do any work properly without the other in this world. In the absence of one, the other wanders aimlessly, and the goal of one's life remains unclear. Thus, the realization of the aim of life, namely nobility, depends on the coming together of men and women.

(Translated from the Oriya by Mary Mohanty. From *Utkal Sahitya*, No. 2/2 *Falgun*, 1345 *Sala*, pp. 42–44)

5

Kokila Devi
1896–1936

Born in 1896 as the fourth child of Bhagavata Prasad Mohapatra and Radhamani of Talapada village of Bhadrak, Kokila Devi was the sister of the illustrious writer of Orissa, Laxmikanta Mohapatra. Married in 1916 at the age of 20 to Managobinda Das of Khantapada, Kokila became a widow in 1927.

Kokila's personal misfortunes can be contrasted with the active and distinguished role she and her other family members like Janhavi Devi played in the national freedom struggle and social reformation movements such as the empowerment of women, the downtrodden, and the Dalits. She set up an ashram in the Harijan *basti* of the village and gave instruction in the use of the charkha, healthcare, and social hygiene. She passed away unfortunately at the age of forty.

Imprisoned at the Bhagalpur jail in Bihar, Kokila, the poet-activist, played a significant role in the socio-cultural life, especially the women's movement, of her region. Although eclipsed by her better-known brother, Laxmikanta, she excelled in literary creativity. Some of her lyrical pieces were published in contemporary journals. However, the bulk of the works remains unpublished.

Kokila's painful awareness of the gender question (she was named 'Kokila', cuckoo, due to her dark complexion) and the tragedy of untimely widowhood, lend a particular significance to her narrative 'Bilasini'. The tale portrays the plight of widowhood and the conflict between the reality of erotic desire and the world of spiritual sublimation.

'Bilasini'

I

The day was nearly over. The setting sun cast an unusual glow of vermilion. Hundreds of red gold lotuses bloomed in the vast empyrean. Notes of farewell resonated in the four corners. Birds returned to their nests, their parting melodies resounding in all directions. The indigo of the distant mountains gently merged into the vast azure. Soon the blue of the forests turned dove-grey. Hundreds upon hundreds of bats hanging from the branches in clusters made the hollows of the trees look fearful. There was darkness everywhere. Darkness covered the heart. A dark curtain suddenly dropped. All became still and immobile.

All of a sudden, the *Tandava* dance of Nature stopped. The heart overflowed with joy. In uneven rows, millions of stars ascended and escorted the queen moon to the sky. Moonbeams flooded the earth. It was as though the goddess of nature had recovered her youth.

Sitting in the courtyard in front of our house, I was lost in thought. Suddenly my blood quickened and the stupor was gone. I heard the conversation of two persons at the wall facing the rear enclosure to the house. The voice was soft, the tone indistinct. Slowly I got up. I craned my neck in the direction of the voice and yet could not grasp everything. Driven by curiosity, I listened more attentively.

A man and a woman. The woman said in a thin voice, 'Why do you have to deceive me any longer?'

The man whispered, 'Why should I dupe you, my dear? Billi! Am I such a knave that I'll set you adrift in the shoreless seas?'

The woman, 'I have no faith anymore in your words. *Chhi*! *Chhi*! Why was I ever born? Me, the fallen one! Oh Hari!'

There was nothing left for me to imagine. It was agonizing to wait till the curtain was finally drawn over the act. The dykes of my patience broke. I could not restrain any longer and called out, 'Jagu! Jagu!'. Jagu did not reply. Only the murmur of the dry leaves was heard. Along with that, the running feet of two in a state of breathlessness!

Suddenly the world reeled before me. Instead of the softness, beauty, and grandeur of a moment ago, there now grew in me a revulsion towards the world. I wondered how there could be so much evil in such a beautiful earth laden with fruits, flowers, and creepers? How could the same earth bear bestiality where the child partook nectar in the lap of the mother, the creeper rose supporting itself on the trees, and the cuckoos thrived in the nests of the crows? Could this be the same earth where the brothers went to peaceful sleep with trusting hands around each other, where clouds and lightning played together, where the hills and skies joined hands, and the sky with that of the ocean? How can such injustice exist here? Is this the same earth where the heat of summer becomes cool by rain, moonbeams kiss the arid land, and lotuses bloom in the muddy pond? How can such blindness exist? Is this the same world where the child laughs in the bosom of the young widow, and diamonds drop from the mouth of a baby, brightening a poor man's cottage? What utter cruelty! What travesty of Truth! I found no answers to such questions. Where was the end to such ugliness? A great desolation arose in my heart. It seemed as though the world would plunge into bottomless pits that very moment, leaving behind a huge deluge with only sharks and alligators.

Why then did I call Jagu? Was he truly our Jagabandhu? Again, the question troubled me. Could Bilasini be the chip off the same block? I still recall the sad times when the poor thing was left behind by her uncle. Deeply moved, his voice choked with tears, he had said, 'There is no joy in the life of this ill-fated one. When I married her off in her childhood, how thrilled I was, contemplating her future happiness! Whoever knew that before it could flower the new bud would wither away in the hands of cruel fate? To think of the pain of widowhood at such a tender age! I gave up the joy of the future and brought back the infant deity home. I knew that it was impossible for me to nurture the motherless girl in this world.' From that day onward, my heart was constantly pained by the impassioned words. I did not feel that Bilasini was not my blood sister and not born from my mother's womb. I had done my best to console the forsaken one. To think that she managed to forget all that!

II

Deeply disturbed, I tossed around in bed. Not a wink of sleep did I have throughout that night! Painting the eastern sky with a reddish

tinge, the sun, like a ball of fire, rose from the edge of the horizon. Its glorious rays radiated the earth. A glow of pink played around the whole sky. Singing a paean to the dawn, the morning breeze journeyed to some unknown land. There was laughter all around. Only the melancholic ones and I were left morose. Indeed, little did I realize how involved I had become in the life of Bilasini. When realization dawned, I could gauge my sorrow. Only then could I identify wholly with her. I rose from bed. It is only then that I noticed that Jagabandhu had been found missing since the previous night. I felt greatly relieved. Bilasini too did not come to me any longer. Nor did I seek her as before. A deep sense of unease overpowered me. My heart was filled with great remorse. The sorrow was not just on account of Bilasini. It was for the helplessness of womankind in general. Bilasini's life was in close danger.

This is how a full month passed. Practically all was forgotten until calamity suddenly struck. Our Bilasini's stigma became public knowledge. God! Isn't it better to die than hear such ignominy? How terrible could be the behaviour of womankind! How could our ears bear such infamy! How can we expiate the sins?

By then, there was a real stir in the village. People conferred among themselves and decided that it would be better not to house such a sinful and unworthy woman. From that day Bilasini was exiled. She had to forsake the house that had witnessed her laughter and tears; her intimate associations during fair weather or foul. There was no way to avert this. The unlucky Bilasini, one time darling of her parents, had to plunge into shoreless seas. There was no knowing where she was heading. The poor dear cried her heart out at the *chowrah* for the whole day! Who knows what thoughts passed in her mind. But the pure soul that I am, like the water of the Ganga, not even once did I raise my head towards her.

The evening's darkness swiftly descended, its fearful mouth swallowing up the unlucky Bilasini. How the orphan girl was washed away in that gloom no one knew or thought it worth knowing. O Society! Strange are your ways! Go on, you poor thing! From now onwards, treat the whole world as your own home; God your sole friend!

III

This is something that had happened seven to eight years back. How quickly did these seven to eight years go by! But the agony suffered

persists till today! The soul has been burnt and turned arid; my whole life one of singular misery! O Hari! Grant me peace!

I did not take anyone with me. Single-handed, all by myself, I set out for Brindavan. Barring a few places, there were no train services then. After seven days of tiresome journey, I arrived at the *Sridham* Brindavan. Bathing at the cool waters of the Yamuna, I cooled my body and mind. Oh, what a relief that was! Then I went for the *darshan* of Sri Govinda. I was not hopeful of a long stay. Therefore I made preparation for departure from the holy land. On the last day, as I was emerging from the bowers of Radha and Krishna, a plaintive prayer of a mother reached my ears. I stood still.

O, what heart-touching melodies! Could there be such wonderful sweetness in the voice of a woman? My mind and heart were filled with joy; I began to pay attention in a state of intoxication. But surely she could not be a human person! She must be a demoness with a human body!

The woman gradually approached and I was stunned by what I saw. Never could I imagine that a female could be so beautiful! Nor could I ever conceive that there could be such lustre in her eyes! My waking consciousness could not bear such thoughts for long. My head automatically bowed at her feet. The Goddess lifted her eyes full of divine love. I was stunned by what I saw. The beating of my heart stopped. After much effort, I called out once, 'Bilasini!' Tears rolled down my cheek. My voice was choked. I looked around and spotted no one. Was I awake or asleep?

(Translated from the Oriya by Sachidananda Mohanty. From *Utkal Sahitya*, No. 20/5, 1915)

6

||Narmada Kar||

1893–1980

Narmada Kar was the eldest daughter and the second child of Bagmi Biswanath Kar, the founder editor of *Utkal Sahitya*. She was born in Cuttack on 12 October 1893. In 1910, she passed the entrance examination of Calcutta University and studied in the historic Bethune College for four years, obtaining her B.A. in 1914. She was the first Oriya woman to pass this examination.

At the age of 26, Narmada got married. Her husband Jitendra Kumar Biswas was a Bengali lawyer, who came from a Brahmo Samaj background. It is worth recalling that the Kars themselves were Brahmos. Narmada accompanied her husband, a *munsif* and a sub judge who served in many parts of East Bengal such as Narayanganj and Barisal.

Later Narmada settled down in Calcutta primarily for the education of her children. A voracious reader, who laid great emphasis on female education, Narmada inspired many women to acquire higher education. Her daughter-in-law Bharati Biswas recalls that she was motivated by Narmada to pass her M.A.

Despite her great longing to return to Cuttack, Narmada Kar passed away at Calcutta on 13 September 1980.

She excelled most of all in translations and adaptations of texts from Western literature such as those by Leo Tolstoy. These works were published in a collection called *Prasad* in 1926. The following story, entitled 'Dilemma', is an adaptation of a tale by Tolstoy, and deals with the virtue of religious tolerance.

'Dwanda'

Dilemma

The city of Surat boasts of a coffee shop patronized by people of many countries and race. They came there for extended discussions. One day, there arrived a wise man from Persia. He had, it appeared, spent his whole life searching after God. An excess of thinking had made him somewhat deranged. Consequently, he became deluded and finally began to doubt the very existence of God. Hearing this, the king of Persia banished him from his kingdom.

The exile had brought a slave with him. The latter waited for him outside. Entering the shop, first he partook of some opium. Later, he sent for his slave and asked, 'What do you think of the existence of God?'

The slave replied, 'My Lord! God's existence is beyond all doubts!' With this, he brought out a wooden deity from his dresses and declared, 'This is my God! He has been my Savior from childhood: my companion at all times!'

The visitors present listened to the conversation in amazement. One among the audience was a Brahmin. Turning to the slave, the Brahmin said, 'You must be a fool! How is it possible that you are constantly thinking of God? The Brahman is the only God and the Brahmins are his true servitors. He is worshipped in hundreds of temples in India. So much has changed in the world in the last hundreds of years! And do not you see that the Brahmins reign supreme everywhere? Are they not protected by the Brahman?'

When the Brahmin fell silent, it was the turn of the Jew. 'There is no temple of God in the whole of India', he argued. 'In fact, God cannot be the Savior of the Brahmins. The God of the Brahmins cannot be the true God! The true God is the God of Abraham and Jacob. Only the Jews are saved by him. You see, from the beginning of creation, the Jews have been his chosen race. He has assured us that

one day he will unite us. And then we shall rule over the whole world.' With a note of triumph, the Jew surveyed the gathering and sat down.

An Italian priest now took up the debate. 'My friend', he said, 'What you claim is not correct. It is true that initially God was fond of the Semites. But now he is sore with you. That explains your present grief. Anyone desiring freedom has to worship him according to the ways of the Catholic. There is no other way of attaining salvation!'

At this, a Protestant priest intervened, 'How can you say that only your religion can grant salvation? For, only those who follow the teachings of the Christ in the Bible are worthy of it!'

Now it was the turn of the Turkman, 'The religion you follow is not the true path,' he contended. 'Mohammed's preaching comprises the true religion. Don't you see how the religion of the Muslims is spreading far and wide? Only the Muslims therefore deserve to be saved.'

This is how the debate over religion went on. It was intense and inconclusive. Each was eager to prove his religion as the best. In the midst of arguments and counter-arguments, one man sat quietly. He was a student from the distant land of China. Unable to resolve the debate, the contestants said to the Chinaman, 'You have heard everything. Now please tell us, whose religion is the authentic one?' The Chinaman reflected for a moment and said, 'I think it is man's ego that debars him from coming to an agreement over religion. Your arguments remind me of an episode in my life. You see, I had set sail in a British ship from China. During the voyage, we anchored at the island off Sumatra in order to load coal. Some of us disembarked and went to the shore. Roaming around, we thought of resting beneath a tree. Soon, a blind man reached us. We gathered that the man was busy unraveling the mystery of the sun. He had gazed and gazed at the sun, but could not reach any conclusion. Finally, he became blind. He could no longer spot the sun. Thus he resolved that the sun was nothing and there was no object called the sun.

The blind man joined our gathering. Along with him came a slave. At the approach of the evening, the master declared, 'When I say that the sun does not exist, am I not speaking the truth? People claim that the sun exists. But then, I do not see it. I see only darkness.' The servant replied, 'I do not know what the sun is, I have no such need. But I know what lights. Now that I have lit the lamp, I can work with its assistance. Therefore, the lamp is my sun.' There was a man sitting

nearby. Hearing this, he said, 'The sun is actually a ball of fire. He rises from the sea every day and sets behind the mountain of our island. Every one is witness to it.' Instantly a fisherman exclaimed, 'Obviously you people know nothing. The sun never sets at the other side of the mountain. I have myself seen the sun setting into the sea.' At this, an Indian present said, 'You are all fools. You have no knowledge. The sun is a God who runs around the sky in his chariot. Only ignorant people like you think that the sun radiates only in their country.' Quite annoyed, this time, an Egyptian countered, 'Absolutely wrong! The sun is not a God. I have travelled everywhere. I know for sure that the sun's rays are not meant for specific countries. Nor does it set behind the mountains. The sun rises in the East and sets in the West.' Before he could continue, an Englishman interrupted him and said, 'You are all an ignorant lot. There is no special place for the rising and setting of the sun. The sun rotates around the earth.' He tried his best to convince everyone about his line of thinking. But, alas, no one understood him. Soon there was a babble of many tongues.

The captain of our ship was an intelligent and wise man. And so everyone requested him to resolve the crisis. The captain said, 'I see that you are all confused. You are only adding to the confusion. The sun does not go around the earth. On the contrary, the earth is daily orbiting the sun. The sun radiates the whole earth. If you look around, you'll doubtlessly see that the sun is equal in heating all parts of the earth.' Everyone soon fell silent.

After narrating the story, the Chinaman said, 'My friends, religion is no different from this. Differences arise only due to arrogance among men. That is why there is so much of a dilemma. The matter of the sun and religion are analogous to one another. As in the case of the sun so also every individual and race looks for his or her own special God. Man tries to confine God within separate temples, while in reality, God cannot be contained within the whole universe. Indeed, the whole world is his temple! No temple can rival the sun's abode. Man's ways, rooted to the notions of the high and the low, can never equal the spirit of God! Man creates many pedestals for him. But no pedestal can equal the niche that God carves out in the hearts of the saintly and the devout. Ignorant of this fact, man creates separate Gods. The closer man approaches God, the more he realizes God's grandeur. Can he ever detest or belittle anyone? One who knows that the sun brightens the whole earth and destroys darkness realizes that he makes no discrimination between palaces and cottages. Nor does he bother

about the rich or the poor, the wise or the foolish. The blind man who succeeds in seeing the sun becomes worthy of grace. He is not an object of disdain. Only blindness or partial sight is the cause of all dilemma and falsehood.' Stating this, he fell silent. And so ended the debate among the contestants.

(Translated from the Oriya by Sachidananda Mohanty. From *Utkal Sahitya*, No. 18/10, 1915)

7

|| Pratibha Kar ||

Pratibha Kar was the daughter of Biswanath Kar, the illustrious editor of *Utkal Sahitya*. Along with her sisters Narmada and Suprabha Kar, Pratibha made a major contribution to the understanding of women's issues. One of the first few women graduates of Orissa, Pratibha wrote regular columns on the position of women in journals such as *Utkal Sahitya*. She also wrote Chapter 13 of *Basanti* (1931).

From *Basanti**

For the last few days, Debabrata had been deep in thought. A change had come over him ever since he had heard of Basanti and Nisha's plan to open a school in their village. Over the last four or five months, he had drifted, as it were, into a dreamland and had completely forgotten that his life could have a purpose. The other day, when Basanti had revealed her intention to set up a school, he had been shocked out of his slumber. He could not keep himself from greatly admiring Basanti so zealously setting herself such an arduous task and thinking nothing of the tremendous obstacles on her way. He felt disgusted with himself. His life before he got married unfolded before his eyes. How naturally he had assumed leadership in his college days; with what enthusiasm he had championed social and national causes; how passionately he had arranged and addressed public gatherings! What great pleasure he had derived from such things in those days! He also remembered all the plans for the future he had made while a student; how he had dreamt of performing great deeds, and had prided himself on the loftiness of his dreams. And now what was he doing? Where had all his dreams vanished? What had happened to his boundless enthusiasm? He was dismayed at the thought of the dull and uneventful life he had been leading. What great hopes his friends and relatives had entertained for him! And now he was doing nothing, although he had had all the opportunities in the world. What would his friends think of him?

All these thoughts filled his heart with an indefinable longing. Fooling around with friends gave him no pleasure anymore. Were all the energy and strength and privileges that God had blessed him with

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* Of the 13 chapters of this novel written jointly, Chapter 13 was written by Pratibha Kar. Primarily a love story, the novel is perhaps the first attempt in the mood of psychological realism in Oriya literature. The chapter deals very prominently with the question of the role of women in public education.

would go in vain, he wondered. No, he would not let his life go to waste!

Sarbeshwara *babu's* vacation was coming to an end. Right from the start, he had been very pleased at the prospect of having a school in his village and had greatly encouraged Basanti and Nisha. He was very happy when Subhadra Devi also gave them permission. It was decided that the school would temporarily be housed in a room provided by Sarbeshwara *babu*. With his sympathy and help, Basanti and Nisha vigourously went ahead with their work. Basanti did not even have a single moment to ponder over what the outcome of the whole thing would be.

Before returning to work, Sarbeshwara *babu* went from door to door with Nisha and succeeded in persuading a few girls to join the school. In the beginning, some villagers vehemently opposed the idea of sending girls of 15 or 16 there. The thought that their grown-up daughters would have to walk down the main street in broad daylight everyday made them uneasy. Others were afraid that once educated, their girls might all become Christians like Basanti. But they were brought around by Sarbeshwara *babu*, who was considered a village elder as he had the special ability of winning people over with his sweet words.

Nisha and Basanti wanted Sarbeshwara *babu* very much to remain present and get the school underway. But that was not to be since persuading the girls and making other arrangements took a longer time than expected. Reluctantly, Sarbeshwara *babu* had to return to work as his vacation came to an end.

It was the first day in the life of the school. Nisha's excitement was something that had to be seen to be believed. Even before the crack of dawn, before the crows cawed, she had finished most of her daily chores. Then she cleaned up the schoolroom herself and hurried to Basanti's place.

Basanti too was very excited. She too had got up before dawn and was hurriedly finishing her household chores. A number of tasks had to be finished before she left for the school. Unlike Nisha, she had to do the household chores all by herself. The slightest error and all hell would break loose! She had to watch her step constantly. She was scared that in her excitement, she might do something wrong and bring the caustic remarks of Subhadra Devi and friends down upon herself.

Nisha came, gave her a hug, and said, 'Why haven't you finished yet, sister-in-law? Look at me, I got up early and finished all my chores. Oh, no! It's already time to go and you haven't done your cooking yet?'

Basanti replied, 'Nisha, you know how much work I have to do. Give me a hand, please, and our work will be done in no time.'

No sooner had she said this than Nisha adjusted her saree and joined in. The chores were soon finished and the two left for the school.

Only 10 girls turned up on the first day, but this did not dishearten Basanti and Nisha. With those 10 girls, they set to work with great fervour. They were confident that if somehow they ran the school properly and the girls benefited from it, more and more would join the school in good time.

In order to boost the morale of their students and attract other girls, Basanti and Nisha themselves went from door to door, accompanying the girls on their way to school and escorting them back home again. They even bought each girl a slate at their own expense. On Sarbeshwara *babu's* advice, the students were made to read their lessons aloud. They also practised handwriting and learnt sewing, and before going home, they listened to stories and parables told to them by Basanti and Nisha.

In time, the efforts of Basanti and Nisha bore fruit. The number of girls increased. Some parents who initially had had some reservations were finally won over by Nishamani who, with her cogent reasoning, convinced them to send their daughters to the school.

The success of the school caused quite a stir among the older, more conservative people in the village. Subhadra Devi had hoped that once Basanti had stayed with her for a few days, all her city-bred bad habits would gradually die out. Now, even that slender hope had faded. What would be more shameful, she thought, than for a housewife to step on to the main street in broad daylight. Oh, no! How would Subhadra Devi face her neighbours? She cursed the unpropitious hour when, carried away by the words of Sarveshwara *babu*, she had given Basanti permission to start the school. How could she have known that Basanti would abuse her permission like this. It was like giving an inch and Basanti taking a mile. Repenting her decision, she seethed with anger.

Madana*ma*, Saria*ma*, Hema*bou*, Para*bou*, and a few other women now had something to gossip about. How could they miss such an opportunity! Countless malicious stories spread through the village like wild fire; everyone's version was different from everyone else's. All at once, Basanti became the talk of the village. At the bathing *ghat*, in

the midday gossip sessions, and the evening gatherings, one and all talked about Basanti. This added to Subhadra Devi's bitterness towards her. She nearly stopped talking to Basanti, and at times even passed a caustic remark or two at Debabrata.

Not that Debabrata was unaware of these developments. Although he had initially shown some interest in Basanti's proposal, in his heart of hearts, he had not been able to approve of her activities. Admittedly, he could not accuse her of committing a sin or a crime. Nevertheless, he did not like the pace with which Basanti was moving ahead on such an important mission. The slanderous remarks against Basanti coming from all sides and the sudden change in the behaviour of his mother, Subhadra Devi, made him feel somewhat resentful towards Basanti. Sick at heart, he brooded—how could Basanti do all this, knowing fully well what the outcome would be? Couldn't she think even for once how her undertaking would give rise to a violent storm whose blows would fall all on Debabrata? Didn't she know how many storms had already blown over him? And why, as the clouds were slowly clearing and nature calming down, did she have to create a new patch of cloud? Thoughts about the future filled him with foreboding. He could not envisage the consequences of the approaching storm. Nevertheless, he could not speak his mind to Basanti. How could he have? There was nothing wrong in what she was doing.

All these thought made him very restless. To divert himself from these worries, he resolved to devote his life to working for the village.

Debabrata had long cherished a dream to set up a library in his village. For this, he had even collected some books from his college days. Now was the time, he decided, to realize his dream. Where could the library possibly be set up, he wondered. A room would be needed for it. As he pondered over the different possibilities, it struck him that he could easily build the room at his own expense. Near their residence, there was a plot lying unused for a long time. He felt that a room could be built there and that it would be convenient for everybody. He called together some energetic young men from his village and told them of his intentions. Everybody readily agreed to join.

When he found that others were equally enthusiastic about the proposal, his spirits rose. Constructing the room would take some time, but Debabrata had remained inactive for so long that he was not at all prepared to put up with any delay. After all, how long would he remain without work? How would he pass his days? And so it was

decided that until the library was built, books would be placed in a room in his house and everybody would meet there in the evening. Handwritten pamphlets were distributed to spread the news throughout the village.

The evening gatherings at Deba's place went on very well, and gradually more and more people started showing an interest in them. In the evenings, the room often resounded with poetry recitations, essay readings, book reviews and debates on various topics.

But Debabrata was not someone to grow complacent about such a small achievement. He pulled together a team of educated young friends and tried to start a small literary magazine. By common consent, it was decided that anyone who wanted to contribute to the magazine would have to write his piece by hand. Debabrata was made the editor.

The group set to work with great enthusiasm and the magazine soon came out with poems, stories, and essays on various topics. Debabrata and his friends hoped their enthusiasm would remain unabated and the magazine would soon be brought out in print.

Debabrata encouraged the boys of the upper primary school in his village as well to take more interest in sports and gymnastics. He even organized them into a group and started coaching them in various games and acrobatics. Thus, a new spirit was kindled among the boys, and in no time they became extremely fond of Debabrata.

Debabrata devoted himself heart and soul to working for the village and tried his best to forget himself. But the fire inside him still smouldered. Moreover, his mother's sullen face and her occasional taunts, as well as the slanderous remarks heard outside added fuel to the fire. Even some of his friends working hand in hand with him would make a remark or two about Basanti. How his own friends could get pleasure by slandering her he could not understand.

The ways of Deba and Basanti left Subhadra Devi at a complete loss. How could she say anything to her daughter-in-law when her own son was behaving as if he was not aware of the disgrace their activities were bringing upon the family. He must be out of his senses, she thought, not to realize that he was now an adult and had received an education and that he should be attending to his duties and responsibilities. Instead, what was he doing? Wasting his time with a group of youths doing God knows what kind of crazy things. How could she scold her daughter-in-law? Subhadra Devi felt like a ship floating helplessly in the sea.

Debabrata tried his best to hide his feelings from Basanti, but Basanti was intelligent and could easily sense what was going on inside him. She noticed that, however hard he tried, he could not mix with her freely, could not talk to her freely. Rather, he did his best to spend as much time as possible outside the house. But Basanti remained firm and unperturbed. There were moments when she did feel distressed, but in good time she collected herself again. She patiently waited for the moment when the untimely patch of cloud that had cast a shadow on Debabrata's mind would clear away. Moreover, the fact that Deba had woken up from his slumber and was starting to lead an active life raised her hopes. With the faith that their work would one day bring them closer, she moved ahead more determined to achieve her goals.

(Translated from the Oriya by Santosh K. Padhy. From *Basanti*, Cuttack, 1931)

8

||Suprabha Kar||

Suprabha was a renowned short story writer. The daughter of the illustrious editor and writer Biswanath Kar, she taught at the Ravenshaw Girls' School, Cuttack, and was a frequent contributor to contemporary literary journals. Her story 'Pratikhya' captures the pathos in the life of a woman and centres around contemporary social evils such as dowry and alcoholism. Despite the odds against her, Malati, the protagonist of the story, chooses not to end her life. She decides to live for her child.

Bayerische Staatsbibliothek

'Pratikhya'

The Vigil

She is a fallen woman. But if you look at her face all your repulsion would vanish, so sad, so full of pain are her eyes, shinning like stars in the dark! Even before the birds stir in the morning, one can see her walking back after her bath with small dainty steps from *Manikarnika Ghat* of Kashi. Only the morning silently witnesses her activities. After a quick bath, she slowly enters Bisweswara temple, offers flowers quietly and silently communicates the agonies of her heart to Lord Bisweswara. The old *purohit* of the temple often watches this devoted woman with admiration. When after puja she sheds tears at the feet of the god, the eyes of the old man do not stay dry for long. One day even the god made of stone seemed to shake a little on watching her pained face at worship. The *purohit* touched her head and asked, 'Who are you, my daughter? You come every day and offer the oil of worship. So intense is your devotion that today even the god of stone trembles! I have myself wept often under those feet. But have never seen such expression in that face!' Cringing from that touch, Malati said, 'Does He listen to my prayers? Then why so much suffering for me?'

'He listens my daughter! Listens to everyone's prayers.'

'With that belief I come everyday and weep before Him—that he might forgive all my misdeeds, will remove all my sorrows and pull me unto His lap.'

'What's your trouble? What misdeeds have you committed?'

What's her trouble—what sins has she committed? How will she express her agonies, and to whom? On the *purohit's* repeated queries, Malati raised her eyes to his face and said, 'Oh, Brahmin, you will not understand. I have many sorrows. There's no end to my misdeeds. I am not even worthy to come to this holy temple.'

Surprised, the old man asked, 'Why, who are you?' With a slow and grave poise she replied, 'I am a fallen woman!' The Brahmin would

not have been so startled if there had been a lightning—the way he did on hearing these words. 'Sinful woman. With what audacity, to make this temple impure? Go away at once.'

Accepting this final command, Malati the culprit, looked back beseechingly at the Brahmin. On seeing her anguished expression, an old memory stirred in the old man. With a choked voice he asked, 'Why did you do so?'

With that touch of compassion, Malati's tears overflowed. In a broken voice and with tears in her eyes she said, 'Why? I have always asked myself the same question—why was I born? ... Never got any affection since childhood. After four daughters, when I was born, my mother cried in despair; father turned his face away. This is how I was received when I was born. As I grew older, I would die of shame on seeing my elder sisters. I am so dark! Understood the meaning of my father's long sighs. When I was of marriageable age, people even began desiring this dark girl—because my father had promised a dowry of four thousand rupees. Is it easy to get so much money? Many worthy young men of this country were willing to marry me. One dark night, one such man came with a band party and married me. With that unknown stranger I started for his house. On the day of departure, my mother pulled me to her lap in secret and cried uncontrollably. A mother's heart—perhaps she guessed something of my future.

The first few days in the new house passed happily. But as the memory of the four thousand rupees faded, my appreciation declined. Besides, I had committed a great crime. My husband became a drunkard. 'The daughter-in-law is inauspicious, the moment she came, she made my son go wayward.' My mother-in-law could never forget this misfortune. My husband's atrocities increased with every passing day. To that my mother-in-law would keep adding fuel. On many nights I lay insensible because of the beatings I got. No one ever came to say a word of comfort. I used to forget all my sorrows on seeing just one face—my son's. My one and only precious jewel. But he also cheated me and went away. How could it be otherwise?—one has to experience all the sorrows that are written on one's forehead. One day, after enduring three days of fever without any treatment, he left me. While leaving, he stretched his small feverish hands towards me and called, 'Mother, Mother.'

'Couldn't endure it any more. A river flowed next to the house. Thought, I would renounce all my suffering in its cold bosom and drown myself. I even went to the place. But a gentleman brought me

back. He assured me that he would give me a job at his house. I forgot everything. No harm in serving at someone's house. At least I would be free of my husband's tortures! I had no wish to go back to that house from where the cry 'mother' had disappeared forever. Looking back at that home of so many years with one last tearful glance, I started off with him. When the bubble broke, I woke up to realize that I had lost everything. Every door in the wide world was forever shut to me. The society, without any reflection on my crimes, by closing all roads, showed me only one way out. On seeing that path, my entire being trembled with repulsion. Carrying the burden of all the crimes; I came away from there—due to the great kindness of the society, I won the title—the fallen woman! But the person who took advantage of one's distress at the loss of her son, and built this reputation for her is an esteemed gentleman in the eyes of the society. Do you know, O Brahmin, with what deep futility in my heart grew a deep anger against God? What rebellion stirred in my heart against the Lord? I decided to ruin myself and open the eyes of the society to the truth!—took a vow that I would go to the gate of hell and say, 'Look, O world. See what great ruin you have brought to the innocent by not doing her justice?' But couldn't do it. The pure memory of my 18 months old son, his last call at the time of his departure, pulled me back from the path of hell. How can I feel the touch of that pure innocent flower, if my heart turns evil! The blocked passages of my sorrows opened up and poured away in torrents of tears. In the darkness of my sorrows, I saw one faint ray of light. Following that faint light I arrived at this place. But even here, the world's kindness has left no place for me. To hide myself from the curious stares of scores of people, I creep here at night and have a *darshan* of the Lord—acknowledge the unforgivable crime of that moment's weakness ... Oh Brahmin! Is my crime so great that there is no reprieve? Even the doors of this temple are closed today to me?'

The old man's eyes brimmed with tears. He couldn't speak. Could only pull Malati to him with his thin frail hands and kiss her on the forehead. After such a long time Malati found shelter in a cool and solace-giving soul.

. . .

The more Malati's service, care and tenderness were pulling the old man, the greater was the anxiety with which a fear was dawning in his

mind. Everyone was keen to know the real identity of Malati. Who was that maiden, whose soft smile brightens up the old man's house? Who is she who waits with the old man's two-year-old grandson in her arms for his return—whose comforting smile makes him forget the fatigue of a hard day's work? When the old man was asked, he replied, 'My lost daughter of many years has come back home.' The child looked at Malati tenderly and called her, 'mother'. Many hidden moments of tenderness surfaced at that call, 'mother', and Malati tightly hugged the boy to her bosom and thought of her lost child.

The apprehension that once in a while tormented the old man one day turned into reality. 'If he doesn't drive Malati away from his home, he will lose his position as the *purohit* at the temple. Fraudulent old man!—has given shelter to such a hag! Let's get a new priest. That cheat is unworthy of the Lord.' The sky fell on Malati's head. 'What has happened? In this old age you have to endure such humiliation for giving me shelter? Drive me away from you. Let me go off to some distant place. I can bear any amount of humiliation, hate. But can't tolerate your humiliation because of me!' In desperation tears streamed down her cheeks, each one of them hit the old man's heart. With deep tenderness, caressing her head, he said, 'Alright.' The young child pulled at Malati's saree and cried, 'Mother'. Malati had tied up the old man in so many ties—how could they let her go? The old man listened to everyone, smiled sadly and said, 'It's not possible, brothers. I can't abandon my child.' 'Then leave this temple.' Looking tearfully at the deity, with a sigh the old man said, 'Fine. All right. If that satisfies you, why will I come in the way? Today I will leave this temple, but I cannot leave my daughter.' After the evening *arati* (lamp) everyone left the temple. The old *purohit* meditated before the deity and then bid Him farewell forever. In the gathering dark, he looked back one last time. His feeble eyes filled with tears. To hide the deep hurt within, he smiled a tender sad smile, and started back. The house was waiting for the old man, as always. The lamp was as bright as ever. But those two eyes which had filled his life with such happiness did not come out to invite him. Sitting on the verandah of the house, the old man called, 'Oh, my child!' No answer. Again he called, but no one came running. Fearfully the old man went in to find the little boy asleep. By his side a lamp; but what's that paper lying by it? Picking it up, the old man found on it Malati's writing: 'I am leaving this world—I am its curse, I suffer, and make people who give me solace the cause of intense unhappiness. Let your paternal heart bless me so that I achieve

peace at the other end of death.' Clasping the sleeping child to him, the old man rushed to the riverbank. Stretching his feeble eyes he saw at a distance, at a great distance where the water was still, something bob up and down a few times and then dissolve away in the endless water.

Since that day every evening, along with the child, with great hope, the old man waits near that water body—who knows, that intense waiting might bring back the dead from the other bank. The child asks, 'mother?' The old man pulls her to him and points his finger—where the water meets the endless sky.

(Translated from the Oriya by Priyadarshi Pattnaik and Arundhati Patnaik. From *Utkal Sahitya*, No. 19/5, *Bhadra*, 1331, pp. 273–76)

9

Rama Devi
1889–1985

Daughter of Gopal Ballabha Das, younger brother of Madhusudan Das, the eminent Oriya nationalist, Rama Devi received no formal schooling. She was married to Gopabandhu Choudhury at the age of 14. Inspired by the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, Gopabandhu resigned from government service. He and Rama soon plunged into the freedom struggle.

Rama Devi is easily one of the best known of the women freedom fighters and social reformers of modern Orissa. After independence, inspired by Gandhiji, she and her husband joined the Sarvodaya movement. She was conferred the Bajaj Award for social work, and a leading women's college in Bhubaneshwar has been named after her.

Jeebana Pathe (On the Path of My Life) (1985) is a fascinating chronicle of Rama Devi's life and times. The excerpt here is taken from that book.

From *Jeebana Pathe*

On the Path of My Life

My father was a government official. In those days, Orissa was yet to become a separate state; it was part of Bengal and Bihar. When my father fell ill, his elder brother would call him back from wherever he was to his own place. He would oversee Father's treatment and allow him to leave only after he was fully recovered. Along with my sister, I usually accompanied Father and stayed with him at uncle's place. The bungalow where uncle lived now houses Lady Shailabala Women's College. The entire family, including Mother, used to stay there at times. Other people also put up there. They were Miss Das, Miss Hazra, and Chandra. During our stay, Miss Das would always lord over me and my sister. She would give us lessons in table manners and how to use the toilet. Slightest deviations from the norm would draw her displeasure. But Uncle never seemed to be pleased with her demeanour. He could never resist saying, 'Shaila, don't discipline the children so much! Leave them alone and they will pick it up as they grow!'

Uncle mostly spoke Bengali during the evenings while conversing with the Oriyas, even with Miss Das. As for Miss Hazra, it was not in her nature to be stern. She regularly spent time with us in the garden. She was pursuing her studies at Calcutta at that time. On her return, she carried fine black clay, for making images, all the way from Calcutta only for us. She herself taught us the art of making images in clay. She made us draw pictures with coloured pencils. Whether it was prompted by her own interest or by uncle's wishes was immaterial. In the garden, she would show us plants and flowers and ask us to draw them. She often helped us with the drawing and also trained us in the art of preparing bouquets.

Mother was more like a Daughter to Uncle. So people would joke, 'You will be an owl in the next birth!' Mother's nickname was Pala. But Uncle called her Pali with affection. He liked the curry and sweet

dishes prepared by Mother very much. So she prepared breakfast, cakes and curry every day on a raised earthen oven on the terrace. Over dinner, he usually heard saying, 'Pali, I may take one more *sandesh* and risk overeating if it pleases you.' As he particularly liked *kakra*, we had more of that kind at home. But he was candid enough to say that his own mother was a better hand at that variety of cake. Miss Das would curiously ask Mother the secret of her trade, and a quick remark from Uncle would follow: 'It is not the oil or spices but the love with which you serve food that makes it delicious!'

Almost every day, we moved around with Uncle in his car. One more adult went with us. Mostly it was the tannery that we visited. The other person with us would escort us through different sections in the tannery and explain to us the activities there, while Uncle would be busy doing his own work. Once, we were getting spruced up for a very interesting trip when Uncle's footsteps were heard on the staircase, and then his voice, 'Where are you all? Come, let us start.' He waited for a while in the drawing room and then left, finding no response from anyone. Father called us immediately after that and wanted to know why we hadn't responded to Uncle. Displeased with us, he said, 'That is not how you should behave. Never do it again! Now don't budge till he comes, and when he does, the first thing you will do is to beg his forgiveness!'

Just a few moments later, Uncle came back and asked indulgently, 'Where are the two monkeys?' He was told we were weeping, having been scolded by Father for our misdemeanour. At once, he came to us, lifted me, tossed me in the air, and gathering me in his arms said with a lot of tenderness, 'You should promptly respond if someone calls you, or you would develop a bad temperament.' Then he pleaded with Father to allow us to go out as we had already been punished for our faults. Saying this, he left with us in his vehicle.

Off and on, he took us to the jeweller's or to the toyshop. To know our preferences, he would ask us which of the items we liked most. 'Pick up anything you like,' he would say. We took whatever we chose, and back at home he talked about those purchases and our likes and dislikes with our parents. Uncle was very indulgent towards children. He would rather have us play with the odds and ends in his sitting room and break them, but Miss Das was too strict about that. She did not like the room to be untidy. There was a chess table in the drawing room with dots of gold and silver. Once in a while, Uncle tried to initiate us into the game.

When he sat together with Father, they talked about national problems and the prospects of a separate state of Orissa. Never did they gossip aimlessly, I recall. And Mother was always present on those occasions. She had a special liking for music. So Miss Hazra made it a point to sing to her, playing the piano herself. She took it upon herself to make us learn songs in Bengali.

Father came back to normal health, and we returned to Muzaffarpur in Bihar. Official quarters, it seemed, were a rarity those days. So we moved into a large rented house. On the front was a big orchard dotted with beautiful flowers. Did it belong to us? Or to the landlord? I often wondered. The two of us regularly hung around in the garden, where there were ripe pomegranates. Once the gardener gave us two pomegranates along with some other fruit. We came upon Father while running home happily with the gifts. 'Who gave you the fruit?' Father asked in a tone of disapprobation. 'The gardener,' I replied with a guilt-ridden voice. 'Does the owner know about it?' he asked, guessing he did not. 'We do not know,' we naively said. He came to know from the gardener that what he guessed was right. Then with tenderness he said, 'My dear, you must know that taking something without the knowledge of its owner amounts to stealing. The gardener has given you the fruit without the permission of the owner. So it is not proper to accept them. Now, go with the gardener to his master and return the fruit to him, and do not forget to apologize to him for what you did.' We immediately went with the gardener to meet the landlord. After all this, we had lost the power to speak. The landlord heard everything from the gardener. He appreciated the gesture, treated us with a lot of affection, and gave us back the fruit with a little more from his own stock. This was the second time that we were punished for having done something not to Father's liking.

Long back, when I was a small child of seven or eight, one day the woman from the laundry came with the clothes. Thoughtlessly, I queried her about her caste. Having overheard it, Father came to me and with a soft annoyance, said, 'You inauspicious wretch! Don't you ask anyone his caste. That is bad manners!' I remember his words till today—and have never repeated the blunder since.

There were a few junior cooks in our service, who were taking lessons from the chief cook. When one of them refused once to carry out my instructions, I was annoyed and said, 'You are employed here, why shouldn't you obey?' As soon as it reached the ears of Father, he came to me and said, 'It is true that he is our servant. Yet, we must not

remind him of the fact, for it may hurt his feelings. Poverty has forced his parents to send him to work at this tender age. At least you should not tell it to him to his face. Think before you speak, whether your words will hurt the other person.'

My aunt told me that once Father asked the cook to escort my elder sister when she went to see the Puja. On her return, Father asked her about the chief attractions of the festival. She joyfully said, 'Nana bought me strange-looking sweets, red and juicy. They were good to taste.' Father could understand what they were and at once slapped the cook on the face. My sister burst into tears and in a voice choked with emotion said, 'You beat him up, Bapa! Poor man! It must have hurt him a great deal. You should not have done that, Bapa.' After that, he is never known to have chastised any servant.

We were staying at Muzaffarpur. Dinner time was about 8.30 or 9 p.m. Once, Father and two of us sisters were halfway through dinner. Mother was sitting nearby. Suddenly a great sound was heard outside, which startled both of us. We could not make out anything. Father said, 'That is the sound of a bomb.' With this, he fell into solemn silence. I remember that sight even now. After a short while, an official came with a letter. Father silently went through the letter and said, 'It is from Kingsford.' Kingsford was a good friend of Father's. We paid regular visits to him with Father. Then Father engaged Mother in a conversation about the bomb explosion.

We had quite a few Bengali neighbours. They were not government servants. One of them was Mr Yogesh, a renowned lawyer. We were very close to some of them. The men used to come to my father and talk with him, and the children used to sing to us, 'Our Bengal, Our mother!' and many other songs in Bengali. In course of time, we also picked up a few. The use of indigenous materials, such as alloyed combs and bangles, and coarse cloths from Banga Laxmi Mill, was going on in full swing.

At this time, Khudiram the revolutionary was tried and sentenced to death. We heard all such things being discussed at home. That was how I came to know about Aurobindo. Father talked to his friends mostly in English, but we could make out what they meant from the bits of Hindi or Bengali that crept into their talk. The atmosphere was tense all around us. We became fully convinced that to do something worthwhile for the country, one had to be self-dependent and use indigenous products and welcome incarceration as well as capital punishment. Talks at home often centred around the activities of the

freedom fighters, for which they were eulogized. We began to feel the impact of all this and realized that this was the reward for those who fought for the country. 'Seven crore cry out "Our country" in a chorus' was the refrain on the tip of our tongue. The activity of Aurobindo came very much into discussion and inspired me. I began to have deep regard for him and tried to know more about him.

We had a fair idea of the jail as we often accompanied Father on his visits there for inspection. He sat in the office and one of the officials showed us the inner parts of the jail. I never saw Khudiram inside the jail, but I remember the day his mother had come to see him. Everyone was talking about him. I felt a strange bond with him and was deeply pained to learn of his death sentence. I timidly asked my father if we could see Khudiram for a while. He turned down my proposal with great annoyance saying they would not allow us to see him. His official duties required his presence at the site of the hanging. When such eventualities arrived, he got up at about 3 a.m., dressed and left early for the jail. The day appointed for the hanging of Khudiram neared. From his case, we learnt that a convict, before being hanged, is asked about his last wish which, if found lawful, is granted. On the eve of the fateful day, the sorrowful event that was to occur was uppermost in my mind. I had a very uneasy feeling and I felt like weeping. We requested Mother to try to ensure Father's absence from the site of hanging. Mother asked us to talk to Father ourselves. We timidly approached Father's table. My sister signalled to me to broach the subject myself. Sensing our presence, Father looked up and said, 'Yes, tell me what you want to say.' Mustering courage, I forced out a few words, 'Please, do not be present at the hanging.' 'Who else will do my duty?' Father said regretfully. We had no answer to that. Then, thinking for a moment, he said that he would not. He looked very solemn. At night, he mostly wrote out the judgements of different cases. That night also, he did the same. Khudiram was hanged at the scheduled time. By the break of dawn, the news had spread far and wide. I can still remember the changed atmosphere, but I feel powerless to describe it. Everyone was outraged, but expressed the feeling only privately. Gradually the tension eased. People's attention shifted and was focused on Aurobindo. There may be many people besides me on whom Aurobindo made a deep impression. An ashram in his name was set up later at Pondicherry. His followers multiplied day by day. The image of Aurobindo engraved in me is that of a revolutionary. I do not know if it is the same with his devotees. It was Aurobindo who made

us realize that one had to sacrifice one's all for the country. I never had an opportunity to see him.

I was fond of listening to stories. Mother, reclining on a bed, would tell us stories after her evening worship. She would choose stories woven around characters from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* suitable particularly for children. Also, stories based on historical events and illustrious personalities such as Rana Pratap, Rabindranath and Lady Chowdhury, and on novels like *Anandamatha* that found place in her repertoire. When it came to Khudiram and Aurobindo, she was at her best as a storyteller, simple and effective. She was so brilliant in her portrayal of Aurobindo that it generated in us a great regard for him. We had at home a picture album of Queen Victoria. Well, I do not remember properly if it was an album or a picture book. It covered the whole period from her childhood to the day of her accession to the throne. One of the clippings showed the four-year-old Victoria pulling a dirt-trolley. Midway in her effort, she was telling the attendant, 'I shall not pull it any more,' and the man was trying to put the idea into her little head that one must complete the task one has taken upon oneself, however difficult it may be. The contents of that book with the illustrations had a lot of educative value, especially for children and women, including housewives. Mother would show us the photographs and tell us something about each. Whatever we heard in the evening, we wrote out next morning for Mother to see and correct. Mother never punished us for any of our lapses, so we were not afraid of her. All of us feared Father as he would fly into a rage at times. We often noticed that Mother took care to shield the servants from Father's wrath by diluting their misdoings while reporting them. Also, we got into the same habit in the course of time, and the servants took advantage of that. Spoilt dishes were explained as special ones made to cater to Mother's taste. They would tell such lies even in our presence knowing they would get away with them. Or they would not do some of their duties and plead innocence saying it clashed with some other work ordered by Mother. They would dodge Father's reprimand with the help of such blatant lies. Mother would keep quiet at the moment, but would softly tell them afterwards that such habits, if not checked, would spoil their nature. Mother never rebuked them. If ever she got angry with them, she would only say, 'You are good to everyone but me.'

Since our younger days, we had been dealing with the laundry man. When the clothes arrived from the laundry, we would keep them properly arranged, replacing buttons if necessary. My sister and myself

had separate sets of things like pens, knives and scissors. The purpose was to see with whom they lasted longer and in better condition. It was a kind of competition. One whose articles went out of order first was to lose. At that time, there was no fountain pen. We were using pens made of wood or feather. To scrape the feather carefully and make it into a pen was quite a feat.

In my childhood, I was fond of games, and when defeated, would burst into tears. If it was a holiday, Father would join us to play cards, chess or cowrie. My sister and father played on one side, leaving myself and Mother on the opposite. During the play, a plate full of fruit like orange and grapes would be put on display. Father could make us win or lose. Sometimes he would engineer my defeat but would still promise to offer me the fruit, normally the privilege of the winner. Some other time he himself would win and eat the spoils with my sister, forcing me to watch on with a sense of deprivation. In this way, he pulled me out of the habit of breaking down in moments of crisis.

We took great pleasure doing odd jobs for Father such as handing him his clothes while he was getting ready for duty, helping him put on his socks and shoes, or taking them off on his return, passing him the water jug after meal, and readying the *hookah* or *cheelum* for him. He had an ear for music. Listening to songs during the meals and at bedtime was almost a hobby with him. During lunch and dinner, we too would be there at the table eating with him, and so could not sing to him. But when he was in bed, both of us would be on his side, one singing for him and the other softly combing his hair with her fingers or caressing his back. Particularly people like Khanu, a Muslim singer, who took a fancy to him, came on his own to accompany his eating with songs. We were staying in our Dagarpada residence in Cuttack. Later on, Father gifted it to Sarbeshwar Babu through a will. We had another house at Puri.

Father always took a horse-drawn carriage to court. Very often, we went with him. When there were a lot of money transactions in the treasury, we liked to sit there and see the cashier at work. In those days, paper money was not so much in circulation. Notes did not exist below the denominations of five rupees, so heaps of coins were a usual sight in the treasury. One had to see the cashier jingling the coins while counting them with a swift dexterity.

(Translated from the Oriya by Sushant K. Panda. From *Jeebana Pathe*, Cuttack: Grantha Mandir, 1984)

10

||Kuntala Kumari Sabat||

1901–1938

Undoubtedly the most versatile and accomplished of the literary women of the early period in Orissa, Kuntala Kumari Sabat's fame is both meteoric and tragic. Born to Christian parents, Daniel (a physician) and Monica, Kuntala spent her early years in Burma and later life in Delhi where she practised medicine.

Kuntala became a Brahmo because of her love for a married Hindu. Unsuccessful in her desire, later she married her mentor Krishna Prasad Brahmachari. The marriage brought much misfortune to her as Brahmachari was a constant source of tyranny and exploitation.

Despite her brief lifespan, Kuntala accomplished much. She wrote poetry, letters, articles and fiction. She strove hard for women's empowerment and advocated their cause in many forums such as the All India Women's Conference in the North (she was the President in 1931) and in Orissa. She believed in the notion of the composite culture, accepted her Hindu heritage, and made symbolism, imagery and mythology from her Hindu past an integral part of her literary creativity. A nationalist, she fought for the self-respect of the Oriya people, as her 'Letters from Delhi' testify.

Kuntala's works include poetry collections like *Anjali* (Offering) (1937), *Uchvasa* (Surge of Emotions), *Sphulinga* (Spark), *Archana* (Worship) (1927), *Prema Chintamani* (Love Song) (1931), *Odianka Kandana* (a set of sad bridal songs) (1936).

The best of Kuntala's novels are *Kalibohu* (1925), *Na Tundi* (The Gossip) (1925), and *Parasamani* (A Very Precious Gem) (1940). She also wrote in Hindi and contributed to several contemporary journals.

Kuntala's poetry is marked by an intensity of feeling and a powerful lyrical flow. Deeply personal and reflective, some of them, such as 'Shefali Prati', carry mystical undertones.

From *Raghu Arakhita**

Raghu, the Orphan

The festival of *Raja* would begin tomorrow. Raghu's uncle, Hrishikesh, had come from Cuttack to supervise the farming. Though it was nearly ten o'clock in the morning, the steady drizzle that started at daybreak had not yet ceased. The sky was overcast with patches of dark cloud. Rasakala put down the pot containing watered cow dung after drawing a thick line of it on the wall. Looking at Raghu, she asked, 'Son, in whose hand does the ladle remain this year according to the almanac? Is it the tribal women?'

'Yes Aunt, Vasu master has made astrological calculations and predicted that the turn of stars would go in our favour this year. Our fields will yield good crops this time.'

'Everything depends on the grace of God. But, son, don't drench yourself in the rain, you may suffer from fever. Go and wash your hands and feet. I will set your meal with your uncle's.'

Rasakala washed herself, changed her saree, cleaned the dining space and laid out the meals for her husband and her nephew. After that, she went to sit on the verandah attached to the kitchen, carrying the betel case with her and got busy preparing the betel.

Referring to Raghu, Hrishikesh said to his wife halfway through the meal, 'Why don't you drive this boy away? Are you deliberately planting the seeds of a poisonous tree? Are you aware what fruits it will bear?' Rasakala could not think of an answer. She continued in silence to fold the betel leaves into cones. She became a little worried. The memory of his late sister-in-law's affection and pleasant behaviour

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* Excerpts from the novel *Raghu Arakhita* in *Utkal Bharati Kuntala Kumari Granthamala*, Cuttack Students' Store, 1968.

filled her mind with grief. Looking at the sad face of Raghu, she quietly bore the sharp pain caused by her husband's abuse. But Hrishikesh did not approve of her silence. He continued, 'People do not pay heed to good advice. You will reap the result after some time. Now, since he is only a boy, your fondness knows no bounds. When he will be able to take care of himself, both the uncle and aunt will be strangers to him. I have reared him till this age since infancy. Why didn't his penniless, widowed mother take this shameless boy along with her when she died?'

The cruel harshness of his uncle's words entered Raghu's ears and pierced his heart. The vision of his dying mother during her last hours flashed before his mind. Two big teardrops welled in the corners of his large, bee-black eyes. Unable to pick up the morsel of food, he continued to stare into his tray of rice, hanging his head. Rasakala noticed the boy's misery and admonished her husband, 'Why are you harping on the favours you've done him? You've only looked after the son of your brother and sister-in-law. It's not as if you've helped an outsider.'

Interrupting Rasakala, Hrishikesh retorted loudly, 'Don't talk so much. Put your piety and pity aside. Had you been through the bone-breaking labour I have to do to earn money, you would understand my troubles. Raising a child of this age in Cuttack amounts to maintaining an elephant. Everything including his meals and clothes, the barber and washerman, has to be paid for. Who can bear such a burden?'

'Let the orphan remain as he is, living on rice and water. But send away the barber boy, Bhima. Let this boy do Bhima's work. He is already ten. He can do all kinds of work. Instead of only consuming his uncle's and aunt's earnings, he should learn to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow.'

A choked sob threatened to burst from Raghu's heart. He went out and sat on the verandah under the eaves at the back of the house, brooding over the memory of his dead mother. The lump-like sorrow stuck in his heart, melted away, and ran streaming down his eyes. He had no one to call his own on this earth. He was all alone—an orphan. His soul was rent with sorrow.

It was noon. The sky had cleared by this time, but water still dripped from the leaves and trees onto the ground. In the narrow drain

that ran below the eaves, sunlight danced in rippling fragments. One or two crows, sitting amidst the dense foliage of the mango trees, flapped their shower-soaked wings free of water, breaking the silence of the midday with occasional cawings. Waterdrops on the *puruni* leaves glittered in the sun like pearls. The boy looked at all these, but his eyes were vacant. His mind wandered beyond the world into a remote land, where his parents and loving sister Ratani dwelt. Alas! Where had the three of them gone, leaving him alone? He was like a priceless gem to them. His sister Ratani never let him off her lap for even a moment. She had passed away. His parents had passed away too. Only Raghu was left behind. Perhaps he had a very strong life. Death had spared him to bear the cruel abuse of his uncle. Wrapped in such memories, the boy drifted off to sleep there on the verandah.

Rasakala looked for Raghu in the house. Failing to find him, she went to the backyard and discovered the boy asleep on the verandah, under the eaves. The verandah was lit as if someone had scattered flowers of gold on it. She gazed at Raghu for a moment, her heart full of affection. She did not know why she loved this little boy so much despite her husband's abuse. She was fascinated by the grace that lay in each of the boy's limbs. He had a complexion of burnished gold, his small palms and feet were pink, as if coated with the lac dye. His small tender lips were as red as china rose. Below his bow-like curved eyebrows, his large liquid eyes were like blue lotus petals. Waves of collyrium-dark hair hung over his forehead, which was even and smooth. His dark eyelids seemed lined with collyrium. His nose was as sharp as a sword's blade and his body smooth and well proportioned. Such a lovely-looking, obedient, and meek boy! Yet he stings his uncle's eyes like poison!

Oh, God! What an unfortunate child!' Rasakala let her loving hands move across his body in deep love. Tears ran down her eyes. She remembered the quarrel with her husband that had taken place a few hours before. Her husband had scolded her so much because of whom? Because of Raghu. And what was her relation to Raghu? He was not her son, but her nephew. But why did her stomach burn with hatred if someone spoke against him? Rasakala never failed to pay them back in language ten times as strong if someone uttered one word against him. She was his aunt. What is the difference between

a mother and an aunt? Was Raghu only her nephew? No, no. He was her son. Raghu had never thought of her as anything other than his mother. He had never hesitated to unfold the secrets of his heart, hiding his face under the secure shelter of her saree's skirt. Raghu was the object of her fondest regard! Her most precious belonging! Perhaps she was rich and Raghu was poor, but could she let him slave because of that? No, she was not capable of doing that. A knife cut through her heart at the slightest pain inflicted on Raghu's tender body. She couldn't bear to part with him! So what if her husband told her to. So what if all the gods said so.

His aunt's loving caress woke Raghu. He rubbed his eyes and looked affectionately at her. She rebuked him sweetly, 'Son! Why are you sleeping here, on the bare earth? You should have slept inside the house, on a mat.' In a voice filled with sorrow, Raghu replied, 'Aunt, I am an orphan. What is the difference between the earth and the mat as far as I am concerned? One who does not have parents ...' Raghu's voice was choked. Unable to speak any more, he began to weep bitterly. His aunt wiped his tears away with her saree and said in deep affection, 'Son, I am your mother, you are my son.' 'No Aunt, you are the mother of Bana and Gouri. Because I have no mother, I have to put up with the harsh words of Uncle,' Raghu said. 'Are you crazy, Son?' Rasakala said soothingly. 'He is your uncle. He has the right to punish you. He can protect you as well. God will be pleased with you if you calmly bear a few strong words from your elders; you are only a child.'

The comforting words quietened the turmoil in Raghu's heart. Placing his little hand on his aunt's back, he began to examine the ornaments in her ears, made of knotted and twisted gõld wires, and commented, 'Aunt, these knotted ear buds are very lovely since they are designed by the jewellers of Cuttack. This time, ask Uncle to get a necklace for you from Cuttack designed in the same pattern as the one Suryee Grandma is wearing. It will suit you better than her's.' His aunt smiled without saying anything and went into the house. Raghu, too, got up and went inside the cowshed to tether Somi, Pata and Dulana to their posts. Evening was about to settle in. Rasakala placed a lighted wick on the verandah.

As the light of the dawn broke over the land the next day, trumpets in the Satapathy household rang out auspicious welcome tunes to

announce the arrival of the *Raja* festival. The women of the village, clad in silk sarees and decked in jewellery, came in rows and entered the Satapathys' large courtyard. The day was one of great revelry and celebration.

Paria Nani was busy distributing betel prepared for the occasion amongst the women. While doing so, she said to Rasakala, 'Sister-in-law, what sort of attitude is this? Yesterday brother told me that you had been quarrelling with him. What is all this?'

Rasakala snapped back in a tone full of contempt, 'Why shouldn't I quarrel, but give in to him? Why should he beat his own drum in the village about being charitable if all he does is offer a morsel of food to his own nephew? It isn't decent. Both his son and his nephew are related by blood. Why discriminate between them?'

'Who is so charitable nowadays? Gopinath and Hrishi weren't sons of one mother. They were only cousins. Showing so much concern for relatives is like knotting a rope of straw. It won't hold for long,' Paria said.

'It's obvious you'll take sides with your brother. Had the sister of Raghu's father been alive, she would have joined hands with her nephew. So what if they have two different mothers, they are sons of the same father. Doesn't the boy have a lawful claim over our property and land? Feeding him isn't an act of charity; he is simply enjoying his rightful share. Why should outsiders interfere? Will any of them offer him a square meal or give him a share in their own fields? Why do their hearts grieve?' Rasakala retaliated vehemently.

Making out the meaning implicit in Rasakala's angry retort, Paria Nani replied sarcastically, 'You have inexhaustible resources. Go on giving everything away. You are wealthy people since you have built ceilings under the thatched roofs. But we are poor. We have no money to give away.'

Rasakala was ready with an equally sarcastic counter-remark and after giving vent to her anger this way, she came and sat on the mat. Raghu, who had taken little Gouri on a tour around the village, came back to leave the crying baby in her mother's charge. The moment her glance fell on Raghu, the proud mistress of the Satapathy household, Suryamukhi, aimed her caustic words at Rasakala, 'Hey, Bana's mother! Has this upstart started going everywhere? Really, you have a heart

overflowing with piety and mercy. The villagers truly say that there is not a lady in the whole village to match up with Hrishi's wife ... But what to say of the mother of this boy ...? She has been burnt to ashes ... O my goodness! What to say of her extreme pride? She was always showing off that she was the daughter of a rich family. As one sows, so one reaps. Both mother and daughter died of diarrhoea, leaving behind this orphaned child. When milk boils over, it goes into the fire of the hearth. When human beings become too boastful, they dig their own graves. So much pride is never spared by God.'

The remarks of Suryee Grandmother made Raghu bow his head in shame. Would the whole world go on reminding him repeatedly that he was an orphan? Wasn't it enough his uncle called him that? This woman had soiled the image of his own mother and sister in front of so many people. He felt a great pain in his heart as if someone had pricked it with a thorn. His aunt looked at him and spoke in a low, sympathetic voice, 'Keep calm! She is a quarrel-monger.' Trying to quieten the weeping Gouri, Rasakala told others, 'I can't stay anymore. This girl's feeling sleepy. I'm leaving.'

As she left, Sama's mother and Tarini arrived. All proposed a game of dice. The old women and the younger ones formed two separate teams. Betel chewing and the game of *cowrie* were accompanied by gossip and backbiting. Paria Nani happily engaged herself in gossip about Hrishikesh's family, and looking at Aunt Suryamukhi said sarcastically: 'O Aunt, did you notice Rasa Aunt? This time she has got herself a new pair of ear ornaments designed in Cuttack. They are very beautiful, really. None of the women in our village wear such ornaments in their ears. Since they are in money nowadays, they refuse to recognize people. What to say of Hrishi Uncle's pride?'

Suryee Aunt joined in and said, 'You're telling me! Hrishi is so shrewd! But I know the history of their preceding four generations. They were very poor and lived on gruel. But now times have changed and they are sleeping in knee-deep mattresses. I have become old. I have come across different types of people during my lifetime, but I have never seen a fraud and cut-throat such as Hrishi. He grabbed his brother's property, sold his sister-in-law's ornaments and designed new ones for his wife. Don't think Rasakala is innocent. She's a great conspirator.'

Presently, Chandramani Aunt stated her opinion, endorsing the view of the other two, 'Yes, Aunt, these people have reduced Raghu to a street beggar! Rasakala Aunt is very reserved and tongue-tied. She's very clever all the same.'

Flicking the dice on the board, Sama's mother remarked, 'Rasakala's not involved in these affairs. The strategy is Hrishi's alone. In the name of my mother! How he drove his sister-in-law out of the house in broad daylight! I will never forget the event. His mother too couldn't stand the sight of her elder daughter-in-law.'

Tarini—'How could she! Her daughter-in-law came from a rich family where she was brought up with good care and pampering. When she came to these people's house, her worth was reduced to nothing. Had Gopinath Uncle not been working as a clerk, Debati's grandfather would not have given the girl in marriage to him. The villagers too warned him against the match. But he didn't listen to anyone. Gopinath Uncle's wife too was a simpleton. After his death, she gave away all her property to her brother-in-law, Hrishikesh. She fell into Rasakala Aunt's trap and committed such an act of foolishness. That is why I cannot bear to look at these people. Now Rasakala Aunt is planning to send Raghu to Cuttack with Hrishi Uncle.' Sama's mother interrupted, 'I don't believe that. How can Hrishi agree to take Raghu along with him? Even here, he can't bear the sight of the boy. Maybe. Who knows?'

Trying to find out whether the counter had landed in 'Home' or not, Champa smiled and said, 'True. He will take Raghu to Cuttack. There has been a raise in his salary from Rs 8 to Rs 20 per month. He will construct a building of his own next year.'

Except for Suryee, alias Mrs Satapathy, none of the villagers had the fortune of owning a building. The last line of Champa's speech sparked off a fire of jealousy in Suryee's heart. 'Let him construct a building,' she said. 'If one does it with wealth obtained through perjury and oppression, the building will collapse in one day. Wait and see, I claim there's not a man as honest as Lakhia's father in this area. Though we're in the moneylending business, investing money in loans, we are not such oppressors.'

Champa and Sama's mother thought to themselves, 'You've always squeezed heavy interest out of people and now you are claiming honesty!' But they did not say anything aloud.

There, at home, Rasakala and Raghu were busy eating cakes and other delicacies. Hrishi's house was situated by the village main road. Though the house was a thatched one, there were three strongly built rooms with ceilings. There was a large courtyard in the middle, and on the other side of the courtyard, at the back of the house, there were four small rooms with thatched roofs, built in a row. One of those was used as the cowshed, and in the room adjacent to it was installed the husking pedal. The room next to that served as the kitchen. The last room was filled with junk. A luscious drumstick tree stood in the middle of the courtyard, bending under the weight of the drumsticks. The lush creepers of Indian spinach stretched densely across the thatched roof of the kitchen. In the space below the eaves of the thatched roof, seeds of gourd and pumpkin were planted in near circular ditches. Rasakala was very fond of spinach. On one side of the courtyard were planted chilli seedlings, while brinjal seedlings were planted on the other. Beds of different kinds of spinach like *khada* and *koshala* were grown at the back of the house.

They had no servants in the house other than the barber, Bhima. Rasakala attended to all the household chores on her own. She never rested. She used to get up at dawn and went on working till nine o'clock in the night. She did all the household jobs, starting from cooking to boiling paddy and husking it by the husking pedal, without much difficulty.

A person of few words but always with a smiling face, Rasakala loved Raghunath more than her own child. Raghu had lost his father at the age of two. Nearly a year ago, cholera had transported Raghu's mother and sister into the dark domain of death.

The villagers were very fond of Raghu as he was obedient. He readily ran errands, as well as he possibly could, for whoever asked him to. Most of his time was spent carrying the babies in the village in his little arms. Moreover, he had learnt many things from the village schoolmaster, Vasu. His sharp memory enabled him to learn many songs and verses by heart, and he could recite them in a melodious voice. But the person he loved the most was his aunt, Rasakala.

His uncle came to the village only twice a year—once during the planting of paddy seedlings in the field, and again at the time of harvesting. He was a distinguished clerk working under Sri Chandra Shekhar Choudhury in Cuttack.

(Translated from the Oriya by Snehaprabha Das. From *Raghu Arakhita,* in *Utkal Bharati Kuntala Kumari Granthamala*, Vol. 2, Cuttack: Students' Store, 1968)

'Adhunika Dharma Samasya'

The Crisis of Religion in Modern Times*

Mr President, Brothers and Sisters,

The subject on which I stand before you to speak today is not an ordinary one. It concerns the problems of religion in modern times. Nowadays there are problems everywhere—problems of food and clothing as well as social and political problems. Life today is problem ridden, and consequently man gets tired and exhausted. His lifespan is shortened and his intellect gets blunted because of his indulgence in the continuous analysis of these problems. In spite of his efforts, day by day the problems continue to multiply.

There are colossal problems in the world of religion today. Opinions among the saints regarding this issue vary widely. There are various interpretations of scriptures just as there are different paths prescribed by different intellects. Man is totally confused today, unable to decide about the right course of action. Hinduism proclaims that it is the *Sanatana Dharma* ('eternal religion') and it is very tolerant. It is the most ancient religion, the cradle of all religions. All paths to liberation are clearly indicated in it. Hence it is the greatest religion.

Similarly, Christianity says that except this faith, no other religion can provide for the deliverance of the sinners. Only the faith in the Christ's theory of atonement is the proper path for salvation.

According to Islam, it is impossible to attain *Allah* unless one is initiated into the Islamic religion. Thus, everywhere every religion is busy proclaiming its own greatness.

It can be ascertained that, if one were to soberly reflect, no single doctrine, however special it might be, is *Dharma*. The essential

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* Read on the occasion of the 94th festival of the Brahmo Samaj, held at Brahmo Mandir, Cuttack.

meaning of *Dharma* is that which holds or binds together. In other words, that which unites the whole world, that which is the only and ultimate support of the human soul. Can that be only an amalgamation of a few doctrines or theories? Can that be under the control of one or two unerring scriptures or prophets (spiritual masters)? No, brothers and sisters! It is not like that! That which holds the cosmic world together, that which destroys all inequalities or separateness, that which builds up brotherhood among people, alone is *Dharma*. Today, the human soul is thirsty for such a *Dharma*.

When *homo sapiens* came into being on the surface of the earth in their primitive state and lived playfully in the abundance of Nature's beauty and splendour, the world was a glorious place for them. The vast blue sky, innumerable suns, moons and stars, myriad planets and satellites, above all, the wide, expanding green earth bedecked with rivers, streams and leafy, flowery forests below, presented the cosmic picture of the universe. Then came the six seasons. Thereafter their lives resounded with the music of everlasting, ever enchanting seasons of the world. Man realized that the world is truly beautiful. The sky, the earth, the sun, the planets, the stars and the moons are all beautiful. Man became the votary of cosmic beauty. He imagined a deity in every existing thing. *Indra*, (god of ocean), *Baruna* (god of rain), and *Agni* (god of fire).

But what a disaster?

Next moment there came a dramatic change. Disease, sorrow, grief, and separation came one by one and disheartened him. He was shaken and devastated by famines, floods, epidemics and earthquakes.

What a juxtaposition?

There was massacre and devastation amidst so much of beauty and sweetness. Man was terrified. He could not now rest content with offering only the *Puja* (worship) and tokens of love or devotion to the deities. Then out of fear he offered sacrifices to the deities. He then started engaging himself in meditation, prayer, and oblation to placate the angry gods. Even then his soul did not rest in peace.

His soul needed something more. He wanted to know who the Gods were that dwelt high above the blue sky, and what forms they assumed. He ceaselessly strove to fathom the secrets of the omnipresent primordial bliss. At last, Man realized that his heaven lay in his inner self and there was bliss in complete self-surrender. Thereafter he conceived the idea of incarnation-worship (*Avatar Puja*). Worship of the unknowable and the inconceivable God appeared to be totally

beyond them. He was in quest of the supreme God in man himself, or in his essence, or divinity. But he could not succeed completely in his effort. Hundreds of frailties, blemishes, innumerable acts of meanness, and defects stood in the way of his realization of *Brahma* and His magnificence. All the professed doctrines, divine paths, yoga or meditation ended in utter futility.

Then came the all important question: what does Man really need or should be in search of? That is the basic problem with the religions of modern times. What does Man need? What can spirituality do to satisfy him? Is it only a matter of one or two infallible scriptures? Is it only by attributing divinity to a few extraordinary human beings that we can get on in life? No, brothers and sisters! Man is not satisfied with this much. He saw Buddha's renunciation; he saw love in its purest form in Chaitanya and he also saw the great self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He bowed before them with love and adoration. Yet he could not be satisfied, or be contented. He then invented very complicated and difficult theories. He applied thousands of sciences and philosophies to the task of unravelling the mysteries of the universe. He fell at the feet of hundreds of gods and goddesses. He went on searching for hundreds of spiritual masters and *gurus* (preceptors). He conducted hundreds of *yajnas* (oblations) and devoted himself to equal number of yogic practices. He often achieved magical and supernatural powers through meditation and other esoteric practices.

But, still, these brought him no contentment; no fulfilment.

Again the same old question exercised him—what does man need? What does he want today?

What earnest desire, what hope stirs in the depths of his soul? The contemporary problem with religion is nothing other than this query.

Call it y*ajna* or fire worship, call it *tapasya* (penance or self sacrifice)—all are but stepping stones to the practice of *Dharma*. Where is the fulfilment if he remained standing on the steps? He earnestly desires to get into the divinely beautiful shrine standing in front of him. That is the supreme goal of his life, he cannot be satisfied with anything less. Contradictions, conflicts between religions, cruel attacks on each other, extolling one's own magnificence and belittling others, are manifestation of one's smallness. And this will not bring peace and contentment to the soul of man.

Religions of modern times should have a single objective, a single ideal and a single thought. The one and the only solution to the problems of contemporary religions is the establishment of oneness

(unity) among them. One special doctrine, only one special scripture, only one special incarnation or prophet is not the supreme goal/ fulfilment of worship. Only one distinguished icon or image, or one supreme God is not enough.

Man today is not aspiring merely to meditate on external objects and worship them as God. On the other hand, he desires to place his dear God in the shrine of his heart and worship him with the offerings of inner love, inner devotion and inner ecstasy. What types of penance, what types of *yajna*, what types of spiritual practices are needed to worship that God in whose lap he is brought up, of whose being he is a part, in whose vastness his smallness is merged for ages and beyond ages, in worlds and beyond worlds? By what method will man worship Him? One who is his father, mother, preceptor, guide and friend, one who is the ultimate fulfilment of all his aspirations, one who is the supreme solace for all his sorrows and sufferings, and one who is an embodiment of everlasting love and benediction! Is there such an external object in this world to be the object of a *puja*? Can any deity, and image, any incarnation occupy the place of the supreme goal of his life?

For how long will he be deceived by such puzzling debates? For how long would he seek shelter under arid theories? Man today cries out in despair and fatigue: 'Oh God! Your worship is my natural duty, your worship is my ultimate happiness; there is no need for complicated and puzzling theories. There is the need for only one thing and one duty, and that is love in its purest form!'

Let that love inundate your heart and mind! Many centuries back St. John said, 'God is Love!' God is worshipped by Love; supreme sacrifice is made by Love and the impossible too is made possible by Love. Love removes contradictions; it establishes brotherhood. Love ushers in unity and harmony between nations, and it prevents conflicts between religious sects. Love overcomes all depravity and all poverty by its mellifluous richness. Its luminous radiance, banishes darkness from one's heart!

St. Paul had once said, 'Endurance in Love is longlasting and Love is beneficent!' There is no place for jealousy, pride, egoism, unruly conduct, selfishness and evil thought in Love. Love enjoys Truth, it does not indulge in sins. Love engulfs all, trusts all, relies on all and preserves all. All predictions, all languages and learning may be buried in oblivion, but Love will never die. Whatever the Bible says is also said in the *Vedas*, the *Koran* and the *Puranas*. The *Brahmo Samaj* today also says the same thing.

God, of course, is the universal Father. His sun shines in England. His rays provide sunshine to India. He is the Lord of the Universe. Contradictory theories do not constitute the religion of modern times. Universal world religion is the religion that fulfils the spiritual aspirations of mankind. That does not depend on the limitations of place, time and person. The supreme Lord is the foundation stone of such a religion. The ultimate aim of that religion is the attainment of perfect unity in the human world. It owes its existence to the perfect harmony of religions. Its full happiness lies in ungrudging service to mankind.

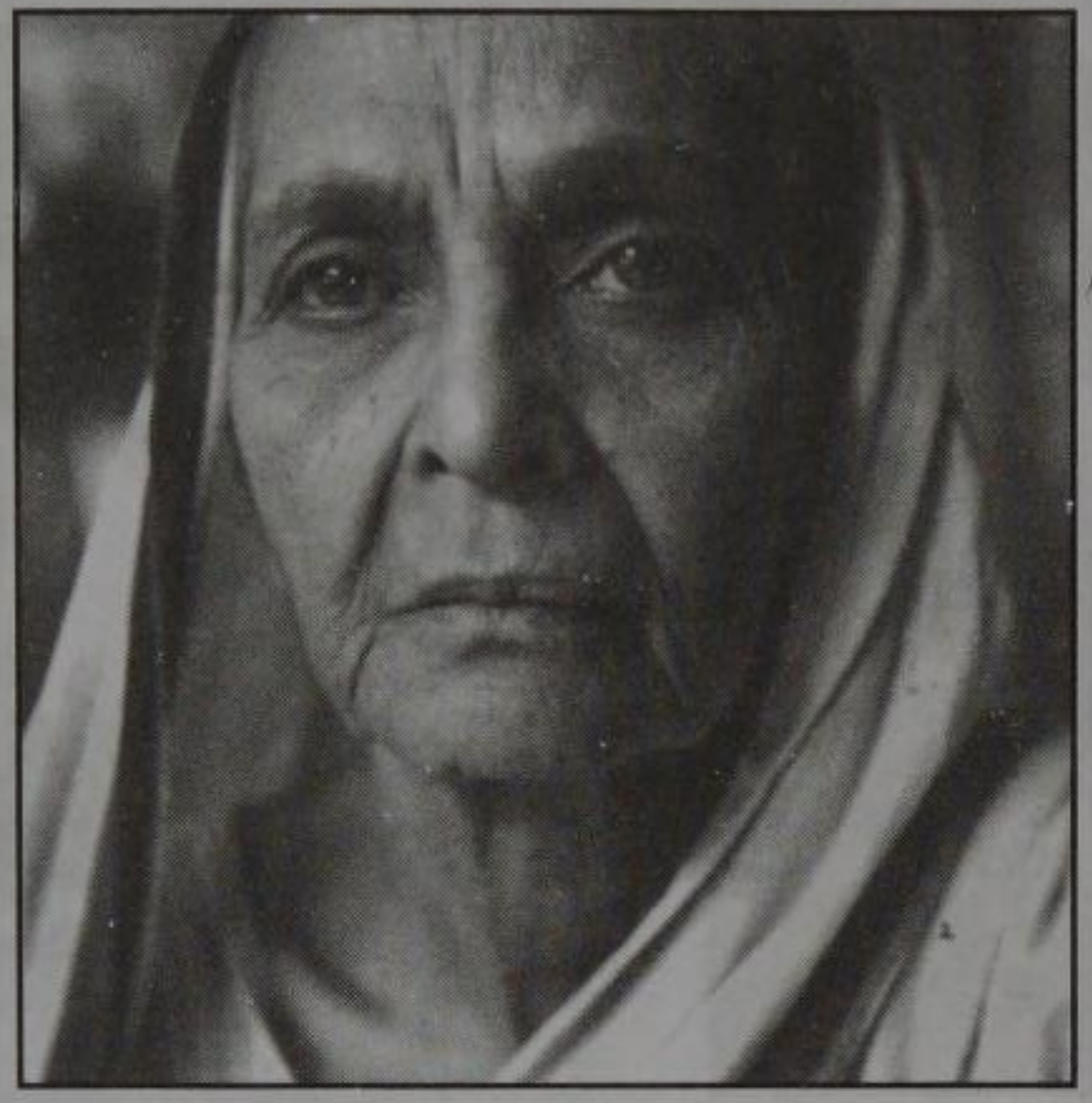
This is exactly the aim of the *Yuga Dharma* of modern times. We are no longer believers in varieties of religious, as in the heart of hearts, we have this aim. We are the children of the father of the universe. In the far-off hermitages of the *rishis* of India echoed this cry, 'Listen, O all the sons of the deathless! We, men and women of the world are the children of the immortal. We are not division-ridden! We are the possessors of *nectar*, the conqueror of death! O, Death, where lies your victory? There should not be any division, multiplicity of views and religious conflicts amidst ourselves. We are the children of God and members of a vast world family! The Supreme God is our Father! Truth is our only scripture, our only duty is to love and satisfy our Father, to do good to our brothers and sisters and serve the world.

Come on! My brothers and sisters, forget all differences, forget all ill feelings and bow down before the Supreme Father again and again! Let us rise above the dust of the earth, rise above mundane humanness and attain divinity. Let us enshrine that Being, the only one, in our inner and outer life, and forgive all weakness, frailties and narrowness by flooding our hearts with love and compassion. Let us accept the idea that we are all brothers and sisters!

May the Lord help us!
Om Shanthi, Shanthi, Shanthi.

Translated from the Oriya by R.C. Rout. From *Utkal Sahitya*, 1391, 31/9, 10 *Pausa, Magha,* 1331 *Sala.*

Sailabala Das



Narmada Kar

Malati Nabakrushna Choudhury

Sarala Devi

Bidyut Prabha Devi

Marriage Photo of Kuntala Kumari Sabat
(Kuntala Kumari and Krishna Prasad Brahmachari)

Women's Conference at Balasore
Back (L–R): Rama Devi, Kuntala Kumari, Jahnavi Devi, Pusi Bai
Front (L–R): Sarala Devi, Kokila Devi

11

Sarala Devi
1904–1986

The first Oriya woman to take part in the national Satyagraha Movement and court imprisonment, Sarala Devi was born on 19 August 1904 at Jagatsinghpur, Cuttack. Her parents were Basudev Kanungo and Padmavati Devi. She received her early education at the Ravenshaw Girls' School, Cuttack and Crawford Girls' School, Sambalpur.

Inspired by her cousin, the illustrious Rama Devi, Sarala read, by her own efforts, some of the leading writers of Orissa including Radhanath, Fakir Mohan and Gangadhar. In 1918, at the age of 14, she was married to Bhagirathi Mohapatra, a lawyer who was the son of a zamindar. Bhagirathi himself was a freedom fighter and provided the necessary moral support to Sarala.

Sarala is best remembered for her essays and critical writings, many of which appeared in contemporary journals such as *Nababharat*, *Sahakar*, *Utkal Sahitya*, *Jugabina*, *Asha*, *Nabina*, *Prabhat*, *Ashantakali*, *Jhankar* and *Dagar*. The author of more than 30 books and 300 published essays, she distinguished herself in works such as *Kuntala Kumarinka Kabi Pratibha* (Poetic Talent of Kuntala Kumari), *Kabi Pratibha* (Poetic Talent), *Sarala Mahabharatare Nari Charitra* (Women Characters in Sarala Das' Mahabharata), *Bishwa Biplabini* (Women Revolutionaries of the World), *Narira Dabi*, *Rabindra Puja*, *Bhima Bhuyan*, *Sudama*, *Nari Jagata* (The World of Women), *Odia Bohu* (The Oriya Daughter-in-Law), etc. Sarala passed away on 4 October 1986 at the age of 82.

The following essay, *Narira Dabi* (The Rights of Women) was published in 1934. In highlighting the reality of the

oppression of women and the need to break out of society's stranglehold, it brings to mind the important essay by Pandita Ramabai Saraswati.

'Narira Dabi'

The Rights of Women

There is much agitation in today's world over the question of independence of women. Both in the West as well as in the East, one hears, in one voice, the demand that women should become free. The campaign has made headway in Western countries. In the East, however, it is still at the stage of inception. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the agitation will bear fruit in the near future.

In India, especially among the Hindus, the meaning of women's liberation is being widely discussed. It is difficult to take stock of the divergent opinions of people on this matter. The very existence of serious differences in points of view on the status of men and women in Hindu society is obviously the basis for the ongoing quarrel.

According to some, the position of women should remain as it was in ancient Hindu society. For them, there is nothing ignoble in that position. Others argue that formerly, the place of women in society was not high enough, that we must better that position and keep up with developments in the world. This second line of thinking should, I believe, guide all our deliberations.

In former times, women did not enjoy adequate respect not only in Hindu society but in all parts of the globe. This is a fact. In order to sing the praises of our ancestors, we might wish to claim that women in those days were accorded favour and respect. This would, in fact, amount to self-deception. The pain and oppression women traditionally suffered for ages are responsible for the flame of rebellion now burning in society. Needless to say, it is clearly the disrespect and neglect shown to women that has led to this calamity. This is the situation not just in our country, but elsewhere as well. Such things become possible when the society is not civilized. When we analyse history, we see that those periods that lacked civilization betray such attitudes towards women.

Consider the facts. Who does not know that it was Sita's indignity that led to the tragic fate of Ravana? Lanka, the 'Swarnapuri', was ravaged and Ravana's clan wiped out, just as Rama had to face humiliation and lose his wife for insulting Surpanakha! Did not the haughty Duryodhana lose his all by insulting Draupadi? Not only the fall of the Kuru dynasty, but, one might say, it also marked the beginning of the ruin that has come upon the whole country since then. History clearly shows that the abduction of Helen led to the destruction of the city of Troy.

Likewise, the neglect of women during the Roman period becomes amply clear when we analyse history. According to Roman law, women were totally in a position of dependence in that society. Before a woman married, she had to work very much like a maid within the household. Little was the change after marriage. She had to constantly minister to the needs of everyone within and outside the family, and lead the life of a slave. If the woman offered wine or poison to a man, Roman law permitted the husband to put an end to her life. The Romans were unwilling to accept that wives could be trustworthy. The husband had the right to turn out his wife at his own sweet will. This, of course, is not the situation now. However, this arrangement used to prevail when the Roman society lacked civilization.

The rights of women were particularly neglected in Syria and Phoenicia. Women were treated like beasts of burden. They were regarded essentially as dolls meant to satisfy the carnal desires of men. Women toiled as slaves in the houses of their fathers and husbands. Anyone could own a woman as his wife. They were treated as pawns in a game. The victor could blithely take away someone else's woman and treat her as his slave. Such were the practices when the countries were in a state of barbarism.

In China, women were not permitted to enter a temple. They could not worship or touch the deity. In Russia, custom dictated that a discontented husband could beat his wife. Imagine treating a wife worse than an animal! Only when a mob of 10 men killed a woman could the act lead to a charge of murder in the court of law.

A similar situation existed in Japan. Like her counterparts elsewhere, the Japanese woman too was not allowed to enter the temple or worship the deity. What a low and ignoble status she had!

What was the situation in Sparta? The husband enjoyed the absolute right to eliminate a weak, 'fallen', or infertile woman. He enjoyed similar rights on other equally flimsy and trivial grounds. A single

woman was forced to accept more than one husband quite against her will, and some husbands did not hesitate to loan their wives to other men. It was also fairly customary to mortgage a wife to secure a loan from a moneylender.

The condition of women in Italy was equally bad. It was felt that women, whether quiet or outspoken, had to be controlled like horses, using a whip. Women were physically sacrificed at the altar of the deities.

It was even prevalent in Sparta that a householder would engage his wife to show hospitality towards his guests. When a man became old, he used to feel gratified by offering his young spouse to a handsome male. Iranian women, on the other hand, used to be sent to the market to be sold as fruits and flowers. A single man could keep hundreds of women at his disposal to satisfy his lust.

The condition of women in the West has changed a great deal. In the modern age, women in the countries described so far have come to enjoy a position close to that of their male counterparts. In Western society today, the status of men and women is fairly comparable. The rights of women have been adequately enhanced both in the political and social spheres. However, even now, the utterly pathetic condition of women in Hindu society cannot be emphasized enough.

There does not seem to have been much change in the status of women between then and now. After all, don't our scriptures say that 'in childhood, a woman is protected by her father, in youth by her husband, and in old age by her son; she is never independent.' Indeed, a woman is never free; she is always under someone's care. She is meant to be worshipped only as a dependent. On the other hand, the adage 'the gods dwell where a woman is worshipped' does not seem to refer to the independence of women. We find it difficult to believe those who claim that women once enjoyed a very high status and were invariably deified.

Who does not know the plight of women? A woman's place, after all, is in the recesses of her house, in the darkness of the 'Antahpur'. She has no relationship with the outside world; the world has little interest for her. She has no way of knowing the ongoing conflicts in the world and the struggle for existence everywhere. Virtually blind, her sole business is to serve and nurse the menfolk in the family. Of course, no one is claiming that nursing and service have no value. But isn't it unbecoming of a civilized society to turn out *coolies* made to work under duress? To learn and acquire knowledge, to have pleasure

in a place of work—all that is unfortunately beyond the scope of a woman today. Her whole world is confined within the four walls of her household. Her life revolves around food and toil. Women today are the presiding deities in their kitchens. Little wonder that whenever we are reminded of women, our attention is drawn into the dark corners of the house.

The scriptures have always looked upon women with suspicion. It is grossly insulting to promote the view that women, by nature, are disloyal, unchaste and destructive.

Agreed, the nature of men and women are different. Beauty, softness and endurance are values associated with women. Similarly, austerity and extraordinary physical strength are generally considered the characteristics of man. But to use these ideas as a rationale for denying rights to women frankly defies logic. Is it reasonable and fair to make an unwarranted assault on the independence of women based on our perception of what constitutes the basis of female nature? Why should women be denied equal rights wherever they can demonstrate skills and competence matching those of their male counterparts?

It is not necessary that the beauty, softness, patience, shyness and excellence of women remain confined to the home. With proper care and opportunity, women are capable of making great progress in the outer world. Man's inability to grasp this basic fact has resulted in the serious decline of our national life.

It is surely unreasonable to argue that a woman ought to remain subservient to the man simply because there are natural differences between the two. Such differences have been used in the past to enchain women in a set of artificial fetters not only in our community but, towards the end of the 18th century, in Europe as well. It has, for instance, been suggested that:

1. In family matters, a woman should always follow in the footsteps of her husband.
2. Education for women should remain limited. The reason for this is to prevent women from voicing a demand for higher education, which might result in disregarding the authority of their husbands.
3. A separate code of conduct exists for women. For instance, a term such as 'chaste', which we hear so frequently, seems always to refer to women. Strangely, we never find a corresponding term applicable in the case of men.

4. Only women are expected to conform to law and social practice. In today's society, such tradition-related laws encompass a vast spectrum, ranging from social customs to laws passed by governments. Such laws act as a deadly noose, suppressing not merely the five senses of 15 million women, but their sixth sense as well, that is, the mind.
5. Women are kept economically dependent, from birth till death.
6. Women need to be protected from the influence of progressive visions and independent thinking relevant to our times. Thanks to such protection, women are made helpless and vulnerable and accept the conventional codes of the male-dominated society, treating them as the will of God.
7. If a decent woman from a respected family is unexpectedly assaulted by a beastly rapist, she has no way of expressing the indignity suffered before the world. If she gives up her customary feminine reticence and seeks to punish the wrongdoer, then she has to suffer social opprobrium. Further, she would be belittled in people's eyes. Such instances are so common in nearby Bengal that those who read Bengali newspapers, weeklies and monthlies regularly can easily ascertain the truth of this statement.

No one can deny that there is a widespread attempt to imprison women through the use of such fetters. Such bonds are surely not the creation of God; they are always manmade. Man has created all such things. Such fetters have effectively turned women into members of the animal kingdom rather than of the human community.

Today, the inner self of the woman aspires to freedom. She is determined to overcome all the obstacles that stand in the way of liberation. The continued closing in of her inner self can never be accepted. This has become intolerable, especially now. And because it is unbearable now, there is a fire of rebellion. Women are determined to discard all forms of superstitious claptrap and begin their lives anew. Not just in our own country, but throughout the world; in the West, there is an effort to seek the total liberation of women.

To satisfy the curiosity of readers, extracts from Justice Meccard's judgement may be shared:

> I maintain that the wife's body can never be owned by the husband. It is her own property and not her husband's. She can leave her husband at her will; she can choose her business or join the political party of her

choice. She has full right to decide whether or not she is going to have a child and at what point of time. No one can keep a woman under his control on the basis of the fact that he is married to her. The women of this country have won independence; they are citizens and not slaves. They can turn their wishes into action. One does not get the pleasures of married life from the codes of rules and regulations. The success of marriage depends on mutual compassion, mutual consideration, mutual forgiveness, mutual sacrifice, and above all, a mutually shared morality.

Anyone who attempts to analyse the causes of unhappy marriages (I too have been observing many such marriages) will see that behind all such unhappy marriages, there exists firstly a lack of the conditions mentioned above; secondly, mutual incompatibility; and thirdly, discordant sex relations. Right now, I do not wish to talk about the friendship between married men and women. This depends to a large extent on human beings and circumstances around them. There is no one who has a stronger dislike for social inequality than I.

Justice Meccard's judgement has created a stir in the whole of the Western world. However apt and justified, such a progressive attitude is difficult for mankind to accept all of a sudden. Looking at the situation prior to and after World War I, the progress of woman has been like an ascent from the bottom of the pit to the high empyrean. Before the war, the condition of Western women was very much like that of Indian women today. However, the conditions of war completely altered this situation. When millions of men leapt onto the battlefield, women were compelled to shoulder all the responsibilities at home. Apart from household work, they were also called upon to earn their livelihood and support their families. Gradually, women developed a faith in themselves and did not think they were in any sense inferior to men. They had the firm faith that, given time and opportunity, they could stand shoulder to shoulder with men. Further, in mixing with men in the workplace, women lost their sense of diffidence.

Gradually, the situation totally changed. Women were no longer willing to remain the playthings of men. There can be no doubt that this change signals progress for society. Those who do not wish to see liberated women establishing pure friendship with men do not seek social development. It is not a matter of surprise that a healthy interaction between the sexes is always frowned upon by conservative elements in society. Of course, such attraction has nothing to do with sexual desire. Can there be two opinions regarding this? A pure

affection that transcends desire brings about the welfare of mankind and makes life pleasurable.

According to Lord Bacon, for instance, love between a man and a woman ought to transcend passion and desire. Western society has tested this and seen that such a relationship between the sexes is perfectly possible. Some people believe that in our own society too, such ties between men and women existed formerly.

In Hindu society today, men experience a great deal of deprivation by not having women as partners in the outside world. Since half of our society happens to be more or less inert, like a block of wood, the nation naturally cannot stand firm in the battle of life. It is in a state of constant unease. As long as there is no equality and harmony between men and women, it will be difficult to imagine the development of Hindu society. Needless to say, whatever is accorded to a man should be granted to a woman as well. On the other hand, we would share the guilt if we unwisely disallow rights to women out of fear of their possible misuse. One who has the right to commit an error also has the right to realize the truth. Both men and women are liable for punishment; why should punishment be only for women? When men become more humane, they will themselves realize their mistakes. Real womanhood will then blossom. Self-realization will lead to the strengthening of the desire for mutual help, and as a result there will be all-round social progress.

It is because of the absence of such self-realization in our society today that we have fallen and lost our way. Looking at the misfortune and dependence of Indian women, Annie Besant said:

> Women stand for *shakti*, women are veritable goddesses. Without woman, man can never have a sense of completeness. Woman is an accomplice and not a ruler, a companion and not a rival. This is the true relationship between man and woman. The freedom of women will usher in the independence of the nation, since men and women are the two halves of a single whole. By pooling the energy of both will India achieve her legitimate rights.

Furthermore, the eminent journalist Sant Nihal Singh, a Londoner, has observed:

> India's degeneration, in the main, is to be attributed to our people's inequitable treatment of our women, for a backward mother cannot produce healthy sons and daughters. As long as a woman's life is not made

> easier, her life continues to be a burden, she has not the time and opportunity to improve her mind and strengthen her body, so long will India's upliftment and regeneration remain unaccomplished and the people backward.

In sum, the main cause of the downfall of India is the attitude of disrespect shown to the women by our countrymen. Because of this regressive attitude, the women of our country are deprived of education today. An illiterate woman can never raise a developed child. How can the nation hope to grow with children who are underdeveloped, weak, and ill? Even today, the condition of women has not improved adequately; their lives are still a matter of burden. As long as this does not undergo a suitable change and women do not receive enough time and scope to constitute their physical and mental strength, the rise and growth of India will remain a dream. What more can we say beyond this?

(Translated from the Oriya by Sachidananda Mohanty. From *The Rights of Women*, Cuttack: Hindustan Granthamala, 1934)

A Letter from Prison

23-6-30, Vellore
The Presidency Jail for Women
Raj Vellore
(Madras Presidency)

Dear Bhagu Babu!

I am glad to tell you that I am having a most delight time here in the company of other political prisoners. Most of us except three or four belong to the B class prisoners. However, there is no distinction between A and B class politicals. Our food is the same, and by the kind courtesy of the Jail Superintendent, we have started our own kitchen in a small tin shed specially erected for our purpose. Major Khan, the Superintendent, is a charmingly delightful in his manners and comes round to our quarters every morning to enquire after us whether we are happy and whether our comforts are being attained to.

Among our company, which mostly consist of Andhra ladies, are two elderly widows, both of whom have been sentenced to six months SI.

You may perhaps be under the notion that I am idling much of the time. I am busy with the study of English. The others also are as busy as I am with the study of Hindi and English. Some also spin and others practise music. Regular classes both in English and Hindi are being conducted, the former by my friend Mrs Lakhsmipathy B.A. and the latter by my dearest friend Durgabai who is a very clever, pretty, active young Andhra lady and who was a dictator of the satyagraha campaign of Madras.

From the morning till evening until we go into the lock up, each one of us does her works regularly and it looks as though everything is being done in a clock-like manner. In the morning soon after our 'chota hazrey' some of us sit together to study the Bhagabat Gita and I occasionally attend when I feel like going there. I have another friend

Kamala Devi who also is an Andhra lady and who speaks Bengali beautifully.

During the Puja holidays I want you to come here with Tikun as I am dreadfully longing to see both of you and Tikun whom I trust has been put to school and his comforts carefully looked after. I would like you very much to keep him under your special care and see that he receives at this early age the best possible training, as a child's future always depends upon the manners and environments in which it is brought up. Since I am away from home and shall not be back for another period of six months, the responsibilities of bringing up our only child rests upon your shoulder alone. Before I came away you made me understand that you would send the little Tikun to the Alakashram. If you have not done so, kindly send him as early as you can. Let me also suggest you that it would better if you could also reside in the Ashram along with child so that he might not feel lonely.

I have received at Jagatsinghpur when I went to attend Chain's marriage ceremony, but I have not received the subsequent numbers. I wonder what has happened to them. Kindly ascertain from the postmaster of your place whether he received them.

Give me all the news about Bapa and Maa, also about my Banku *bhai*, Joti, *nani*, Mira, Tima, Rini, Shanty and Hari and Bapa *bou* and my uncles and aunts. What is about Gopa babu's family? Alakashram? Write to me as early as you can because I am eager to know all about my home and Utcal.

I am looking somewhat fresh and pretty and strong, but as the food consists mostly of chillies, sour, I do not relish it. To compensate for the food which is not so much to my taste the superintendent has sanctioned me an egg daily.

You remember that some years ago I lent B. Nayak a sum of Rs 100 which he promised to pay back, the letter of his should be with you and before the (time) expires I want you to sue him in the court and realize the money from him. Please pay back Rs 15 to B. Das (Advocate) which I borrowed from him long ago.

I want half a dozen of Javakusum oil, 3 thick exercise books. Kindly send them if possible. Please write to Radhamohan, the brother of Niranjan that he should send the books of Rabindranath Tagore which I left at their house and write to Banshu Ratha, the manager of Utcal Khadi department to send a Khaddi thick woven nice coloured blanket for me. All my sarees are torn. Send me some *khaddars* from my box.

Durga wants to see you. My love to Tikun. Please write me something, the day routine of Tikun.

With Namaskar

Yours
Sarala Devi

(Written originally in English; only a few spelling mistakes have been corrected—Editor).

'Bharatiya Narinku Mahatma Gandhinka Prerana'

Mahatma Gandhi's Message for Indian Women

If someone were to document the process of the awakening of women during the period from 1921 to 1947, he would give Mahatma Gandhi the credit for whatever progress women made in the field of education and economic development. All the pioneers in the women's movement have been shaped by his inspiring example. At the root of whatever these women do lay Gandhi's thought, ideas and work. For this reason he would always be revered as the great mentor of the women of India. I cannot think of any other leader in the world, whose views on women are as liberal and brave as those expressed in Gandhi's writings. The solutions to women's problems, he has suggested, apply not only to women in India, but to their counterparts all over the world. In responding to his call to take part in the Satyagraha, countless unlettered and neglected women languishing in the villages of India have come out and brought glory to their country. Even now, following Gandhi's instructions, many women are engaged in carrying out constructive programmes in villages. These women have received affection from the masses for their sacrifice and selfless service. Their example has encouraged women to rouse themselves from centuries-old stupor, reject superstitions and plunge themselves into a life of action. What great social reformers of the 19th and 20th centuries like Raja Ram Mohan, Keshub Chandra, Vivekananda, Iswar Chandra, Dayanand Saraswati could not achieve, was made possible by the great saint Mahatma Gandhi. It is the women, the Harijans, the peasants and the oppressed sections of society who have truly benefited from the freedom struggles led by the Congress. To them, who lacked a voice, Gandhi has given the power to speak out against oppression. Gandhi has enabled women to break the shackles of the harem and dedicate themselves to the service of the nation. This awakening has nothing

to do with the establishment of a Christian order in the 19th century by the missionaries and *memsahibs* from England. Gandhi discovered the power which lay dormant in Indian women, and strove to bring it out in the open.

In a backward and superstition-ridden state like Orissa, Gandhi ushered in an era of awakening. Since girls in our society are economically vulnerable, greedy parents marry off their beloved daughters to old men or to men marrying for the second or the third time. Such marriages are no different from business transactions. These result in the girls getting widowed when very young and in their becoming victims of abuse. Gandhi has fought relentlessly against the evil practice of child marriage.

The number of children who are born and die soon after birth in our country is higher than that of any other country in the world. This is a consequence of poverty. We should therefore make sure that we do not bring to the world millions of children and let them grow up hungry and illiterate. In view of this, Gandhi has urged young men and women of our country to practise *Brahmacharya* and self-restraint and thereby control population growth. In his opinion, a woman's virtue is her most precious ornament. He has therefore urged women to give up their jewellery and luxuries and devote themselves to serving the poor. He expected selfless and dedicated service from women. He advocated widow remarriage and inter-caste marriage. Addressing women at a meeting held in Midnapore, he said that women should raise their children in such a way that they would be able to dedicate themselves to the service of their country and their countrymen. This would be the greatest contribution women could make to national life. He has inspired not only women in Orissa but has also given strength and courage to women all over the country.

Gandhiji's movement has thrown up women like Sarojini, Vijaya Lakshmi, Aruna, Sucheta and Amrit Kaur who have won recognition for themselves. His ideals have also inspired women in Orissa who are leading a life dedicated to service. At the moment, Gandhi is earnestly appealing to members of the Hindu community to take women violated and abused by Muslims back into their fold and to rehabilitate them. We learn that Gandhi's greatness has been enhanced by his appeal to Hindu young men to marry girls in Naukhah and Calcutta who have been victims of rape. Women should go through Gandhi's books on women. They should shape their lives according to his ideals, and sacrifice themselves in the service of the country. We

have heard from Gandhi about how life becomes meaningful if we live it for others. We have also heard about his concept of non-violence, about the glory of culture and humanity, and the importance of truth in the development of human personality. But we have learnt nothing from all this. It is only by translating this into action that we can truly worship him. No other mode of paying homage to him would do.

Gandhi has always striven to make truth and non-violence the basis of this politics. But only future historians could say if these will play any decisive role in our lives. The coming century will judge men and women of his country according to his standard. These are not confined to ideology and idealism. When Gandhi's wife died, he set up a Kasturba fund, dedicated to the welfare of children and to the improvement of health, educational standard, and the economic welfare of women in India's villages. This action is without parallel in the world. Maybe because we are too self-centred and mean we are unable to follow the path shown by Gandhi. We are indifferent to the question of the welfare of women. But Gandhi was convinced that unless the women of India are awakened, all-round development of the country would never be possible. He disapproved of the way young girls in the West were educated, for he thought that the kind of education they received was unnatural and violent. Work aimed at educating and liberating women and ensuring their collective well-being formed an important part of Gandhi's vision of the future. But where are we now? How close are we to this vision?

(Translated from the Oriya by Anil Pradhan. From *Nababharata*, February 1948, pp. 22–24)

'Purusha Jibanare Nari Prabhaba'

The Place of Woman in a Man's Life

In the newspaper it is printed:

> 500,000 WOMEN to be unveiled at King Jog's Order.
>
> —Tizana, (By Air-mail)
>
> King Jog's order for half a million Albanian women to cast aside the veils worn for centuries in accordance with Mohammedan custom was inspired by his future wife, Countess Hannah Mikes of Hungary.
>
> —Srimati Sarala Devi, MLA
>
> Countess Hannah has made the abolition of Mohammedan restrictions on women a condition of becoming the queen of Albania.
>
> She also insists on obligatory monogamy in Albania.
>
> —*Illustrated India* April 5th, 37

A feature has come out in *Illustrated India* that five lakh women of Albania will be free of the Muslim tradition of veils (*purdah*). The king of Albania, Jog, has proposed to Countess Hannah Mikes of Hungary. Princess Hannah has kept a condition for her marriage—the tradition of veils for Muslim women be abolished and it be made obligatory for men to be monogamous. Only then would she marry the king. As per her terms, the king has given an order that the women should cast their veils aside.

The feature has come out briefly. But is it possible not to bow to that extraordinary personality and womanhood of the Hungarian princess who has made the termination of an age-old tradition of veils and polygamy a condition for marriage to her betrothed, the king of Albania, and sent such a message to him?

Woman's power, since time immemorial, has achieved impossible feats. It would not be inappropriate to say that woman's force has

nurtured and reared civilization since its birth. If we leave apart the ladies of the inner palaces of Europe, forget queen Victoria who was known for her compassion and benevolence to her people, and examine closely our own motherland, then what do we see? Influenced by the spirit of women of this county, kings and emperors have done impossible deeds, brought about radical changes in the monotonous pages of history. The influence of women of this country has had deep impact on the likes of Sri Chaitanya, Raya Ramananda, Nityananda, Raghunatha and other such holy saints and their followers. Starting from saints, holy men and *yogis* to ordinary men who rose to do immortal deeds, in the inner sanctum of everyone's heart lies the inspiration of women. In ancient times, in Utkal, the Hindu emperor who dug Jain caves for the queen's *puja* and his own meditation, created Ranihansapur—at its root one finds woman's inspiration. Influenced by queen Singhapatha Jhusi—princess of Uttara Patha—her induction to and acceptance of Jainism, the emperor also accepted Jainism and spread its message throughout Utkal.

Very often the kings who ruled over Utkal have been inspired by the religious beliefs of their wives. They have constructed and named many palaces, sites and cities after them. Women like Draupadi, Kunti, Satyabhama, Sita, etc., of the *Puranic* times have inspired their husbands and sons and have been the central force behind their good deeds. Starting from establishing kingdoms to building temples, pools, wells, etc., many such creditable achievements have been made possible in the world because of such virtuous women.

The influence of women has been great in the lives of great poets, idealists, dramatists and artists also. If one goes through the biographies of poets and writers like Dante, Tolstoy, Shelley, Shakespeare, Rabindranath, Kalidasa, Vyasa, Valmiki, Vidyapati, Chaṇdidasa, etc., one can see and judge the inspiration and motivation that they received from their beloveds.

During Muslim rule, many gardens, springs, tombs and mosques were constructed by the begums and queens. In contemporary times also, in the lives of poets and eminent statesmen, well-known dramatists and novelists, the influence of women can be felt. In the life of Edward the Eighth, and Amanulla, this was distinctive. If the reformation proposed by Queen Suraiya had been rejected or if Lady Simpson had been given up, these kings would not have had to renounce their kingships. Sri Ramakrishna Paramhamsa's spiritual realization was possible only due to his wife. He saw the reflection of the Ultimate

Shakti in his wife. The way Radha is inseparable from Krishna, Laxmi from Narayana, Sita from Ramachandra, similarly, in the sacred sanctum of the hearts of thousands of Hindus, their wives reside inseparably. The devoted Padmavati has been immortalized in the poems of her husband Sri Jayadeva who shared her devotion. Gandhi and Napoleon are the creations of their mothers. Since ages, the influence of women has been felt on men. It is only woman's tenderness that has lent beauty to the austere male self. Man is the creator. Woman the root cause of such creation. Where has man succeeded in his creation without the support of woman? History gives no such evidence. In a nutshell, it is only woman who has inspired creation, self-expression, self-control and the spiritual quest in man. The men in whose life there is no touch of women, who have rejected women, neglected them, and gone on spiritual quest, only in rare cases have they succeeded. The failure and ignominy in the life of a millionaire is illustrated again and again in the history of men and in day-to-day life as well. Woman is not the creation of man. On the other hand, it is only because of woman that man has come into being. With family, at home, in society and country, at workplace, in spiritual endeavour, it is only woman who is the solace-giver, companion, fellow-worker. This essay is not written to praise women; to show how they influence the busy and responsibility-ridden lives of men is its chief intention.

Along with these, if one looks in the opposite direction, what does one see? Due to woman a lot of bad things have also happened in this world. And even now there is no end to this.

I have already said that man is the creation of woman. Where man is all powerful, where man's good is the only objective of woman, there man is no longer an ordinary man and has to be measured by the yardstick of a superman. But that's only one in a lakh or a crore. On all the occasions, for everything, their examples are not apt.

There is an intrinsic link between the Christian civilization of the West and its relation to women; that way the fate of Muslim women and the Muslim civilization are closely related. In the same way, it cannot be denied that women had a certain influence on the Aryan tradition of the Middle Ages, the civilization of the Hindus and the Buddhists.

Today, in India, it would be appropriate to say that we have been influenced strongly by Western materialistic civilization. Men and women, all suffer the same fate! Still, if the lamp of the house of the Indian householder is still burning strong, who is it other than the

Indian woman? Because of the dismal state of statesmanship, the Indian man has lost his spine. He is forced to tell lies, be dishonest, steal, is committing crime and violence. For his very survival, like a lost traveller, he is wandering bewildered. Deluded by the glamour and illusions of the Western civilization, he has drifted far away from his ancient and rich civilization—into the infinite middle of an endless ocean. To struggle against this endless futility—one no longer sees that courage, that inner force in the Indian woman anymore. She is putting the noose of defeat, dependence, servitude around her neck and also wrapping the same knot around the neck of her man. What humiliating defeat? What play of God with fate! What sad state of Indian cultural life! Any self respecting person—man or woman—would his heart not rend to pieces on seeing such things?

And what does one see if one stretches one's sight towards Utkal? One sees, an unhappy wife of a lawyer. Why? Because, the lawyer has taken less money from the poor client. If the husband cannot earn something extra by taking bribe, then he is considered an unworthy husband by the wife.

One sees the doctor's wife who challenges her husband's worth if he doesn't take a heavy fee from the poor patient; or else for the virtue of his kindness he has to feel ashamed before the wife. One sees situations where the landlord is considered unworthy of his position by the wife if he cannot get back the principal as well as interest from the poor tenant by making him sell his very utensils. In that case there is no end to his humiliation. One finds the wife angry because the businessman makes less profit from his customers.

One finds the wife of the careerist, engineer, deputy, clerk, peon, constable, policeman, examiner, teacher, publisher, writer, railway officer, priest, industrialist, and government servant, all suffering from the same fate! Through job or through bribe, whichever way, we want money—need ornaments like our rich neighbour's wife, need mahogany furniture, oil paintings, horse-driven carriages and motorcars. We need Banarasi saree, voile and silk saree, blouse, wristwatch, fountain pen, shoes, broaches, dark-glasses and houses! In equal proportion we need both useful and useless things for our children! Thirst, material things, goods, money! Nothing behind, nothing ahead either—the whole world is dark! Running after glamour, gold and money, all activities centred around desire, crores of greedy tongues, only chasing the fire of lust, to find where it all ends. The lamp of life suddenly blows out—everything becomes dark. This is life—this is

the ugly naked shape of modernity! In this golden palace of the ogres, the woman of the 20th century is a prisoner! Fiery thirst! To the adventure of pleasure is today's woman drawn. She has lost her very self. Can such a woman influence man with her gesture, sign or words? The queen is today dressed as a destitute, a beggar! With what offering will man today worship this woman? Today the goddess is hungry for blood. Unless she drinks the blood of crores of men, puts the smear of blood (*tilak*) on her forehead, and turns the earth into a funeral ground, she is not fulfilled. She has created, but she has achieved. Today's lust and desire have intoxicated and destabilized her. She is the fallen woman of the same creation of which she is the mother.

Since those days, man in this country has had to experience the agonies of an ill-fated life. Woman can no longer motivate man to change things. She motivates, she influences only towards destruction and killing—that fire into which she has sacrificed thousands, including herself as well.

Today, on seeing the news clip about the terms set by the countess of Hungary, I remember the ancient history. Kshatriya princesses of North India used to bet on the conduct of their husbands. Today's queen, in order to eliminate bad conventions and rites, is trying to influence her would-be husband. It is likely that, had the would-be husband not loved his would-be wife immensely, the possibility of such a condition would not have arisen. However that may be, if in this way women tried to influence men, there is no limit to the great benefit for the country and the community that they could achieve. Because man loves woman, respects her, admires her. It is natural for an educated, cultured woman to lead her husband along the fair path. However, it is because she is leading her man along the selfish, evil way that the world is in such a dire state today.

(Translated from the Oriya by Priyadarshi Pattnaik. From *Sahakara*, 18th Section, 2nd Issue, *Jyestha*, 1937, pp. 160–64)

12

||Malati Choudhury||

1904–1998

Malati Devi was born in a distinguished family of East Bengal. Her parents were Kumudnath Sen and Snehalata Devi. She was inspired from her childhood by the Western philosophy of education. After her matriculation, she was drawn to the ideal of Rabindranath at Shantiniketan. She married the eminent social worker and freedom fighter Nabakrushna Choudhury and plunged wholeheartedly into various campaigns including the movement for a new pattern in irrigation, the establishment of evening schools, the abolition of untouchability, salt satyagraha, and picketing before shops selling foreign textiles. In 1930, she courted imprisonment at Bhagalpur Central Jail as a result of the salt satyagraha. She was imprisoned several times in her career. She strove steadfastly for a healthy society and established many welfare centres especially for the Adivasis. She also campaigned for prohibition, the elimination of leprosy and sexually transmitted disease.

Social service apart, Malati Devi excelled in the field of arts. She staged a number of playlets of Rabindranath in the adapted form such as *Natir Puja* and *Barsha Mangal*. She directed plays like *Mayamriga* and *Mudra Rakhyas* at the Baji Rout Ashram at Angul in Orissa.

'Ajira Bharata O Amara Kartavya'

Our Duty Towards the Nation

Dear brothers and friends,

You have invited me to chair this session at Patamundai, for which I would like to thank you. Not just India but the whole world is now going through perilous times. You all know that during an earthquake the whole world turns upside down. In place of earth, water, and in place of water, earth pours in. Things constructed a long time ago crumble. Man constructs thing anew, remembering that now in place of water there is earth and in place of earth there is water. The cultures, traditions, habits, experiences and lifestyle—we call it society—that we build up so carefully are also ripped apart by one revolution after another. Human race, then, has to go through very difficult times. The reason for all this is the fact that even if a very great and benign civilization is created, it does not remain the same forever. Time's motion always expects new things from human beings. For mankind, to change old traditions, conventions and start from a new base may feel like an upheaval brought about by time. Today, due to the war, all the countries worldwide—because countries have crumbled—are busy working towards imagining a new world. Where the rich had forgotten about the well being of the poor, and had indulged in the betterment of its own selfish self, there that class has been totally uprooted by the masses who have become the masters and are busy constructing a new order for the betterment of all. The countries which under a common front were implementing a Nazi rule have now come down. Their pride has been destroyed. The people who had risen to the top through the downfall of their country and culture have now virtually been eliminated. Countries like France, Greece, Poland, etc., have been forced to give the rule of their countries into the hands of farmers and workers. The British who once looked around their extended domains proudly, and said that the sun never set in their kingdom, who

everyone acknowledged as the first class empire, have today been reduced to a third-class country. That America which, even today, is considered the richest and most powerful, is re-evaluating its own strength. Even Russia, known as the land of farmers and workers throughout the world, has made reformations in its existing systems; and is still making changes and modifications under the pressure of war. Before Russia came into the hands of the farmers and labourers, the new Russia, it had wiped off the old history from her surface. Due to war a nationalist attitude again evolved in the minds of the Russians—because of that now it has again had to dig up and bring out its history and tradition. International Russia has to contemplate today on many of its traditions, or else how will it be able to protect itself in this new world?

The continent of Asia, that continent which for certain reasons had made possible the greed and desire for extension of the whites of Europe; her small countries are now no longer willing to give in to the desire of the colonial extension of the white residents of Europe anymore. Today Siam (Thailand), Sumatra, Java and Burma's farmer and worker brothers are demanding their rights. The mighty China, after seven years of war, is now engrossed in civil war. The crown of Asia, our India, also does not have any peace! Not just within the Congress, even among numerous government employees there are countless parties, and in all organizations one sees a great deal of unrest. The desire for freedom among all classes of people along with the courage and firmness to achieve it is also on the rise. Mahatma Gandhi's chant 'Do or Die' has engrossed the heart of one and all. The slogan 'Quit India' which British warned had to be stopped or else they would not release either Gandhi or the Congress leaders; to the sound of that same 'Quit India' slogan India is now stirring. Today's Indian leader Subhas Chandra Bose's army, the Indian National Army, has won the hearts of 40 crore Indians. Forty crore Indians are also not willing to believe the news that the beloved of their hearts, Subhas Chandra, is dead.

After five years of fighting on the part of India, that which has brought the greatest misery in this unhappy world is the atom bomb. The people who have the atom bomb and try to frighten the world with it, even they have understood that against the power of the people a powerful weapon like the atom bomb is useless. It is for this reason that the British, who also have a share in the atomic weapon, are trying to appease the Indians and are making their ministry run from across

the seven seas and 13 rivers. The British argue that they are unwilling to give India full freedom because of Hindu–Muslim disharmony. Although this is partly true, still Gandhiji, the Congress party and many discerning men say that even if there is civil war and disharmony, the British should go—India will be able to take care of herself. But then it is not easy to abandon the greed of 200 years of rule. Hence, the proposal that the British ministry has extended smells of hypocrisy. It is natural for the British—who do not see the direction of the wind—to do so.

So, brothers, should we keep on waiting for the British to change their mind? Never! We have to acquire full freedom, and with our own force. The force can be mustered by following the direction shown by Gandhi and by bringing together every village. Gandhiji has put before the country 15 kinds of different constructive activities. Today everyone knows of them. Saying a familiar thing again and again makes it lose its importance. Hence, I do not wish to repeat them here. The spindle; women's education; dairy farming; knowledge of cleanliness; farming; farmer's and worker's unions; removal of untouchability, you must be tired of listening about all these again and again. Even people who talk of these are tired. Yet one still has to repeat them. That's because there is no other way if we wish to train ourselves for bringing *Swaraj*. 'Transform each village into a fort.' Keeping this ideal in front of the country we have to proceed. Even if something called *Swaraj* drops into our hands from above, unless we build our lives anew, we would not have the strength to sustain it. Untouchability, especially, is dragging us behind; one has to emphasize this fact, pull out the evil root of this impure belief, trace the minor roots and cut them off as well. For this, the education of women is absolutely necessary. The child who is growing up in the lap of its mother will also learn nothing if its mother is not educated. Hence, even highly educated BAs and MAs lack education in this direction. The idea of untouchability, from his mother's lap, is flowing through the veins of such a person. Even before he can speak, he hears that the *Hadi* and *Bauri* brothers of his village are untouchables. The education outside cannot dispel this. We see this in our day-to-day life. Untouchability has to be removed from our country, and in order to do so our mothers have to be educated too. So, today, our first slogan is, 'Educate the mothers. Remove untouchability.'

Can I not expect it from you that within six months, from every house of Patamundai *thana*, you will, through proper means, eradicate

that contagious disease called untouchability that is eating away at the very spine of our society and culture? If it is not possible, I will believe that it is a wasted journey on my part, and you must also realize that your efforts in inviting us here have gone waste.

Brothers, you might be getting a little annoyed. Thinking, 'we are not keen to listen to advice. Talk to us about our Patamundai. We are poor farmers—what do we understand of all these things? We are already tired and half dead from the restriction over food in India. Tell us how we can get sugar, kerosene, cloth, rice.' It is not that untouchability has nothing to do with these things. However, there is not enough time to make you understand the finer points. Sri Nabakrushna Choudhury will talk to you about sugar and kerosene.[1] That's because he has assumed the responsibility of taking your opinions and supplying these items to you. You will hear him tell you how to build unions and associations and discharge your responsibilities, and if such unions and associations can take care of the food problems of our farmer brothers, tomorrow they can definitely, along with converting the villages into forts, make the villagers aware in the areas of clothing and education. Let's not look up. All the power is already potent in you. If you wish to live happily, if you wish to rear up your children and have a handful of food in peace, then do not sit contentedly after casting your votes and choosing your representative. Keep all your power in your own hands. If we are powerful and do things after proper contemplation, we can face difficult times and overcome them.

In *this* thana, three influential zamindars lord over you—Bhatikona, Ali and Kanika. The carefree rule of Ali and Kanika is not hidden to anybody in Orissa. Mahatma Gandhi has repeatedly warned the landlords that they should think of themselves as the keepers and supervisors of people's land and think of their safety. But why should those who wish to rob listen to words of goodness? Hence, in order to relieve the people from these atrocities, the Congress has decided to abolish the zamindari system. Not just the zamindars, but all the middlemen between the people and the zamindar, it has decided to eliminate. 'The land belongs to the one who has the plough.' This slogan has today spread from village to village. Let the farmer know that he does not have the right to play with his land. He should not also have the right to just sell it to anybody he pleases. The land will go only to the person who holds the plough and tills the land. Many new things in this new world will come and stand before you. They might hurt your own selfish interest, but please try to realize that they

are for the good of our culture as a totality. The culture that is afraid of abandoning the old is left behind—it has to bear the scarcity of rice and cloth.

(Translated from the Oriya by Priyadarshi Pattnaik. From *Choudati Chitrapata*, Cuttack: *Granthamandira*, 1989)

Note

1. At that time Sri Choudhury was the Food and Supply Minister in Sri Harekrishna Mahatab's Ministry.

13

||Nirmala Devi||
1906–1986

Nirmala Devi was born in an aristocratic family in the Balikuda village of Cuttack district. Her father, Brindaban Kanungo, was a zamindar.

Nirmala had her early education in the village and subsequently married Durga Charan Das, the famous administrator.

Nirmala Devi was associated with various literary-cultural associations. She composed more than 200 poems that were marked by the love of nature, spiritual ardour, worship of beauty and a great simplicity in diction. She had three collections of poems to her credit including *Deenante* (1953), *Seemante* (1962) and *Barnaraga* (1986).

'Antare Mora Asa Asa Bave'

Come Within Again and Again

Come within again and again
O my most intimate one!
Inside my blue interior
have I decked a scented dwelling,
only for you!
I have placed lotuses and lilies
in the seat of my heart.
Come and sit again, my beloved
O come, my dearest, come!

The flame of heart burns
with the wick of emotions!
I light it and linger.
The night fades, the flame dies,
The scent grows stale!
Come, O God of my life
My heart is torn by this separation.
Only for you
is tonight so precious!
The scented night wilts,
the star of poetry rises.
The birds chirp and
the whole bosom is in agony.
This love-oil of my naked breast
please come and receive, O beloved!
The desperate call of this dejected heart!
Please hearken!
This life will be fulfilled
and I shall rejoice
Only when you come and touch me,
Once with your lotus-fingers!

(Translated from the Oriya by Priyadarshi Pattnaik. From *Kumkum*, No. 1/7, April 1949)

Come Within Again and Again

Ἄνωθεν Μοῦνα Ἀεὶ Ἀεὶ Βοᾶν,

14

||Haripriya Devi||

1915–1996

An outstanding woman poet, Haripriya Devi has several noteworthy compositions to her credit. They include poems like *Sharadi*, *Malayakumari*, *Jagarani*, and translations like Bhagvad Geeta and Ritusambhar as well as a number of devotional songs.

'Ashru'

Tears

My life is full of sorrows—
tears my silent companion.

With their touch, in a moment
this stony heart achieves pure peace.

Only because of them can I dismiss
The ache of my heart in my quietude

for knowing my intense pain
they come to pacify me.

With tortured hearts from the corner of the eyes
When they glide down silently

for a moment my full heart
forgets its intense agony.

Among gardens, within flowers
everywhere only pictures of my tears—

They are my lifelong companions,
with them have I made my heart like stone.

My birth came with tears,
and I shall carry them to my death
when in the dying days
they slowly come and swell up in the eyes.

(Translated from the Oriya by Priyadarshi Pattnaik. From *Sahakara*, 2nd Edition, p. 164)

'Bandini Nari'

Woman, the Prisoner

Prisoner as she is,
of what use is her life?
Like a mynah in a golden cage
She is a flower of decoration.
Creating her, God,
haven't you bestowed her body
with a heart?
Why, then, humiliate her so much?
When there is a body
must it not have free mind?

As she lives
By the whims of a man,
bowing her head before him,
when there is the fire of revolt in her
she would rather go to the battlefield
of her independence
than suffer a life of hell.
Has this ever struck men?

Has anyone ever known
what's there in her heart?
Beneath her smile
flows the river of tears.
She is not born for nothing
nor was there any fault
with her when she was born.
Like God's blessing
there is equal amount of milk
to her son and daughter alike.
Then why this ignoble discrimination?
Is she only destined to suffer
all the defeats of the world?

Youth is only an excitement for a moment.
This body is gold now, dust next.
Once excitement is over
life is nothing but a burden,
nothing but a pretension.
Therefore, brother, tell me,
won't the play of tricks
in a woman's life
come to an end?

Will she remain a prisoner forever?
On what right do you imprison her,
this woman, the *Shakti*,
who has let you build in her heart
your palace of luxury,
who has created you out of her blood?
You heartless one, living in your world
of deep-rooted prejudice,
don't you smell of selfishness
when you suppose she'll remain
blind forever in a world of darkness?

(Translated from the Oriya by Rabindra K. Swain. From *Utkal Sahitya*, November 1940)

15

Urmila Devi

Urmila Devi distinguished herself as an outstanding essayist. In 'Nari Swadhinata' (True Freedom of Women), she explains the need for consciousness raising among women. In her writings, she strove for the abolition of social evils like 'sati' and child marriage. Her essays campaigned for widow remarriage and equal space for women in social, economic, cultural and political spheres.

'Nari Swadhinata'

True Freedom of Women

> Awake! Awake! Awake! The greatness of Indian womanhood must be the cry of Indian men.
>
> —Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda's pious saying has reached the widest circle today. There was a time when people showed disdain at the very mention of women's liberation. Today, that time has passed! Barring a few self-seeking, authoritarian and self-styled 'guardians of society', the whole of India has today come to realize that in social, political, economic and all other spheres, man cannot progress without the co-operation of woman.

> India will never rise, never shine
> If Indian woman fails to awake!

The significance of this saying is quite apparent today. If womanhood remains locked inside her home, as in the *Dark Ages*, then the hopes of prosperity and freedom of this race will forever remain a pipe-dream. Due to all these, both men and women have understood the necessity for women's liberation. Like the helpless stone image of the eve caught in the serpentine embrace, woman has remained tied until now, her body and soul seething in the anguish of bondage. But there is a limit to this. Now that the woman has come to realize her despair, the flames of rebellion have started to burn.

Man still sits idle, despite being aware of these developments. He is still reluctant to give the woman her due. But woman can never depend on the whims and caprices of the menfolk. She does not want to live life as an object of man's pity. She will extract her dues from society to the last pie. It is necessary for womankind to know what the

Indian leader Smt. Sarojini Naidu has said about the awakening of women in a speech in New Delhi on 2 March 1935:

> Women are no longer tools and toys in hands of men. Women today are fired with new enthusiasm. We do not want the right to oppress anybody, but we want to discharge responsibilities. We want to work for political, moral and economic uplift of the country, shoulder to shoulder with men. We do not want to be a dead weight around their neck.

The movement of woman's awakening today has adopted this saying of the famous woman as its ideal.

Woman's liberation movement took its birth in the West. Before the dawn of civilization, womanhood has gone through endless sufferings everywhere. It is difficult to narrate the terrible misery that women had to undergo in the past in countries such as Italy, Sparta, China, Japan, Russia, Syria, Frunesia. According to Roman custom, woman was to be controlled by lashes, no matter whether she was gentle or a shrew. Girls were sacrificed to propitiate gods. In Russia, men treated women worse than animals. A man was arraigned for homicide only if he killed as many as 10 women. In China and Japan, woman was barred from entering temples. In Sparta, the lot of the women was still worse. A man was allowed to murder his wife if she failed to produce a child. A single woman was forced to satisfy the lust of many men. She was often pawned by the husband with the moneylender for debts. Woman was used in the same way as by menfolk in Syria and Frunesia.

However, with the progress of civilization the condition of women has improved considerably in those countries. The success of English woman's emancipation can be estimated from the following episode.

An English woman was badly thrashed by her husband after a tiff. The woman ran away and took refuge in the home of a gentleman, whom she knew before her marriage. When the husband went there to bring her back, the gentleman protested saying that so long as she did not go of her own will, he could not ask her to leave. Enraged, the husband filed a case accusing the gentleman of having abducted his wife. After hearing all the parties, Justice Maccard pronounced that even a married woman could walk out on here husband on her own will. The husband had no right to stop the wife's natural wishes.

Justice Maccard's verdict had caused quite a stir in the West. Of course the event occurred much after women's liberation in the Western world. Before the world wars, European women lived the lives of dependents. When millions of menfolk jumped into the battle, their

women took charge of running their homes. At that time they realized that woman could equal man in the affairs of life. From then, the doors of woman's freedom was flung open and because of that Western woman today occupies the same position as man in the political and social spheres.

Let's now take a closer look at Indian women. In very early times, during the Vedic and Puranic ages, women were liberated in India. In that age, women could take part in all social events. But it is very difficult to say whether woman was in favour of or opposed to the shameful customs like *Sati*. Whatever it was, later during the Muslim rule, woman's condition deteriorated abysmally. Since then, they remained captive in the shackles of dependence. There are some compelling reasons for such eventualities during the Muslim rule. History shows that the Muslim monarchy was extremely tyrannical and autocratic. Supported by their rulers, the royal employees especially the Muslim soldiers went on harassing and raping Hindu girls. To protect the girls from such torture, they were kept hidden in the dark interiors of their homes.

Maybe such thinking is not totally baseless. But such cruelty does not occur any more in our society. In the light of the 20th century civilization, no man will dare to torture a woman openly. Further, the law is always watchful in these matters. Yet our society has continued to keep the woman in chains by persisting with the vile practice, by giving it a garb of lawful and time-honoured custom. Because of this, woman's condition today is far worse than that in the olden days. Speaking against woman's emancipations, many argue that liberated women tend to lose their virginity; but if we look a little close, we can see how preposterous this idea is. First, the term 'virginity' is applicable only for women; why is there no word of similar meaning relevant for men? Further, the way the high priests of the society accuse an innocent girl of incontinence, would a kind-hearted man do the same? Even if a woman is held as unchaste, who is responsible for the loss of her chastity?

Human race, God's highest creation, is divided into two classes—men and women. Then why will one class go on torturing and laying all the blames on the other, after having misappropriated all the privileges. Just because he has the key he eternally locks up womankind within the four walls, in the guise of restraining a demonic instinct—not a sign of true humanity. To keep the woman in chains in the name of chastity is to herald the total destruction of womankind.

Many people air interesting opinions about woman's emancipation. They think that a liberated woman will no longer remain woman; she will snap all relationship with man, and in her tyrannical ways she will bind man hand and foot. What an absurd idea! The quotation from Sarojini Naidu's speech explains the great objective of woman's emancipation movement. The sole aim of emancipation of women is to make women equal to men in educational, social, political and financial matters, and to make her work for the welfare of the community and the nation. The needs, complaints and demands of women in these matters should be analysed thoroughly to have a good grip on the problem.

Education

> Educate a man and you educate an individual, educate a woman, you educate a family.
>
> —Lord of Averbury

Woman's education was active even in ancient past. In that age were born innumerable educated and learned women like Bagdevi, Sarswati, Viswavara, Jyotsna, Tami, Khana, Lilawati, Devahuti, Gargi, Maitreyi, Sulabha, Savitri, Kshyana, Kashi, Sundari and Malini. When the Hindu rule came to an end and Muslim monarchy took over, woman's education disappeared from India. Later when the British rule was established, Lord Macaulay started Western education here. After few years people realized that if they lacked Western education and did not expose their womenfolk to it, they would face many problems. Encouraged by this, some educated people arranged for education of their daughters in the cities. In the year 1883, eight girl students passed the entrance examination to Bombay University. Gradually women's education is taking its root in India.

In the 19th century, women's education was not widespread even in the Western world. But in the last few years, this education has gathered great momentum in Western countries—India stands nowhere in comparison to them. In 1914 the number of girl students in German University was 4, 100; in 1926, this had gone up to 7,260. From Table 15.1 we can see the number of literate women per thousand in Orissa and in India, as compared to other countries.

Table 15.1 shows the slow progress of women's education in our country. In Orissa 34,861 girls were enrolled in the schools during

Table 15.1
No. of Literate Women Per Thousand

Country	*Women's Literacy (per thousand)*
Denmark	1,000
Germany	1,000
England	915
Japan	960
Philippines	910
France	940
India	15
Bengal	32
Madras	30
Punjab	15
United Province	11
Orissa	7

1926–27. In 1931–31, their number became 32,543. In Orissa, women's education is in fact going down. Who is responsible for this? The condition would not have deteriorated if the government, the public and the local board had kept an eye on it. Of the 50 lakh females in Orissa, only 1,440 know a little bit of English. While young women of England and other countries study in schools and colleges or even earn their living by taking up jobs, the Oriya girls of the same age group falter while struggling with their *Khudurukuni Puja* books. This is a serious matter for contemplation.

. . .

Woman's miseries have been explicitly shown in all the above areas. Despite being an important part of the highest creation of the Almighty, woman has been silently suffering all the brutalities. But a new dawn has appeared at the horizons. She is now on the road to freedom. To work for this end Sarojini Naidu's All India Women's Conference has been founded. So far 120 branches of this organizations have been established. Let every Indian woman join this organization and strive for her own emancipation. The London-based eminent journalist Sant Nihal Singh has written

> India's degeneration in the main is to be attributed to our people's inequitable treatment to our women, for a backward mother cannot (sic.) progressive sons and daughters. So long as the women's lot is not made

> easier, so long as her life continuous (sic.) to be a burden, so long as she had not the time and opportunity to improve her mind and strength in her body, India's uplift and regeneration will remain unaccomplished and the people will continue to remaining downward grade (sic.).

Indeed, the main reason behind India's backwardness is the disrespect shown to women. As long as woman still has to get back all her rights, and so long as she has not been provided the proper means for her mental growth, the progress and welfare for the nation will remain a distant dream.

(Translated from the Oriya by Chinmay Kumar Hota. From *Sahakara,* 1937, pp. 63–71)

16

||Shakuntala Devi||

A leading writer in the post- independence period, Shakuntala Devi's noted essay published in the journal *Shankha* in 1947 underlines the importance of the right of women to their own existence and their destiny. As she declares in the following essay: 'sisters, men by treating us as the innocent, helpless, simpletons have weakened us. We have forgotten our own ideal, and by posing as passive and infirm we have done harm to our own cause.'

'Nari'

The Woman

We accord humans a higher place than animals. Why is it so? It is because man has conscience. He possesses the ability to analyse his own mind. He knows what is wrong and what is right. In a public lecture he says that one who knowingly commits any wrong does not deserve to be called a human being. But what does he do in his own life? Whether due to his desire to show off his manliness or his inability to resist his evil instincts he does not flinch from doing an evil deed. In view of this, I can emphatically say that when the word 'woman' occurs it brings to a man's mind the picture of a beautiful girl, as a means of gratifying his carnal desires. His conscience asks him whether a woman is meant only to become a loved one. Is woman born to satisfy man's sexual appetite? Does not society expect anything more from her? At that moment dances before his mind's eye the picture of a woman assuming the role of mother or sister. But the very next moment he decides that woman is born for no other reason than to give him the pleasure of love.

In reality, looking at the women who have received school and college education, men cannot but reach such a conclusion. What are we doing now in the name of the pursuit of studies? We have simply learnt from schools and colleges how to stand groomed before a man and steal his heart by saying sweet things. If he adores us saying, 'How beautiful you look!' we fall in love with him instantly throwing into the winds all social ties and restraints without bothering to verify his integrity. Madness engulfs us and we think of love and nothing but love. Can we fulfil our desires if a man loves us truly? No we cannot. We still have to reckon with constraints imposed on us by society.

We sometimes elope with a man to unknown places denying the norms of society. But after some days the mind of the man changes. He cannot afford to defy social conventions. Leaving us in the lurch he again comes back to society, as if he has done nothing wrong. But

what happens to the woman? Unable to eke out a living, she becomes a prostitute, or commits suicide, when she finds there is no other way. Is this the fate society has decreed for us? One feels terribly angry with society.

Again we remember our days of glory. The stories of Sita, Savitri, and Padmini, who really lived like partners of their husbands, come to our mind. There is no dearth of stories of female courage in the Vedas. The story of *Khana*, the mathematician comes to our mind. One feels inspired by the erudition of women such as Gargi, Maitrei and Madalasa. The pen spontaneously sketches their characters.

Consider the time when kings ruled the world. Literature had found a place inside the king's court. Kings used to call meetings of pundits. They used to engage in learned debates. One who won was rewarded by the king.

Once the king of Mithila convened a meeting of pundits. A *rishi* named Dwepayan, after defeating other pundits, was about to receive his reward. A woman appeared on the scene. Her presence did not make the audience wonder, and the king received her courteously. She put some difficult questions to *rishi* Dwepayan. He, for his part, gave correct answers to all her questions. Although the lady pundit was defeated, the questions she had asked could not have been answered by anyone except a *rishi* of Dwepayan's stature. These questions have been mentioned in the *Upanishads*. But the account of the event does not make one feel that the appearance of a woman in a meeting of pundits or her taking part in a scholarly debate was anything unusual or unnatural. It is clear that women were considered equal to men, and there was no *purdah* system. The lady pundit just mentioned was none other than Gargi.

This *rishi* Dwepayan had a wife. Her name was Maitrei. When Dwepayan was fed up with the material world, he called Maitrei and said to her, '*Devi*, the time for my *Vanaprastha* has come. I am going now, leaving with you the fortune which I have earned. Now live comfortably.' Maitrei said, tears in her eyes, 'Swami, what has this wealth to offer me? Will it lead me to the Truth? Give me such wealth as would enable me to find the Truth.' Dwepayan, for his part, saw that his wife was ready for the moment of enlightenment, *Brahma Darshan*. So he granted her request and gave her spiritual advice.

It is said in *puranas* that there was a king in a country called Rutudhvoja. Madalasa was the name of his wife. The king was very brave and was famous both inside and outside his country. He was very fond of

Madalasa and let her do whatever she liked. When their first child was born, he named him Vikrant (the mighty one). In those day, it was the mother who was responsible for her child's education. So, Madalasa started teaching him. She taught the prince Vikrant in such a way that without caring to justify the meaning of his name he went to the forest in search of truth. Shortly afterwards, a second child was born to them. He was named Shatrumardan (one who vanquishes his enemies). The queen took upon herself the task of teaching him. Shatrumardan realized that no one was his enemy and he, too, renounced the world and became a *sanyasi*. The king could not hold patience when the third child was born. He requested the queen, 'Rani, you have made two of my sons do the opposite of what their names meant. This time, please name the child yourself.' The queen named him as 'Alark' meaning a mad dog. The king told her, 'Is it a name worthy of my son?' The queen answered with a smile, 'Dear king, you are no less than a mad dog in view of your striving for titles and your trying to keep up the prestige of your family. The naming of my child is a fitting reply to the laurel-hunters.' 'That's sure', the king said, 'but a king has to be a little high-handed to maintain his grip over the country. Dear queen, I sincerely request you, please do not make this child a hermit. Teach him to become a king!' The queen saw his point, and taught the child in such a manner that he became a great king. Here we see how a king had to bow down before Madalasa's ideals and how she had the ability to teach her children to become hermits as well as a king.

There is no dearth of such instances. If we search like this we could come across many more instances like this.

My dear sisters, out of affection man calls us simple, meek and weak. As a result we have really become weak. We have forgotten our ideals, and by presenting ourselves before him as simple, meek and mild we have made a mess of ourselves spending our entire life by the fireplace. But, after doing so, we have not been able to become man's equal even in the sphere of cooking. But are we really weak? Does not the blood of Padmini flow in our veins? Would not her soul ridicule us in heaven? Looking at our sister Vijayalaxmi Pandit, who has successfully pleaded for the cause of India at a meeting held in the United States of America, why should we feel weak? Why should we groom ourselves as if we are mere articles of enjoyment for men. Awake, my sister, awake! Let us come together and we will show the world what we can do!

(Translated from the Oriya by Sarat Mohapatra. From *Shankha*, No. 8, *Magha*, 1947, pp. 470–73)

17

||Sushila Devi||

Many literary women in Orissa based their creations on contemporary events of national significance. Sushila Devi's 'They Too are Human' is a memorable narrative based on the traumatic experience that followed the partition of the country. The story was published in *Shankha*, 1947. The tale poignantly explores the manner in which religious bigotry is overcome by the establishment of bondings between men. In showing the coming together of Reja and Shankar across religious barriers, Sushila Devi confirms the possibility of interreligious harmony, a theme that has not outlived its relevance.

'Manisha Semane'

They Too are Human

The canal that flowed through Mirzapur divided the village into two equal halves. On one side lay the Hindu settlement and on the other the Muslim. Perched on the canal bridge, two boys of eleven or twelve were engaged in animated conversation. One was Sayed Hameed Reja, and the other Shankar. Reja was the only son of the Muslim Sardar of the village. And Shankar? Minus parents, he was the poor darling of his widowed aunt.

Taking out two guavas from his shirt pocket, Shankar said, 'Here, Reja, have one! I stole it for you! Had nearly forgotten about it! Go on, eat it!'

Contented, Reja took a bite. 'Come on,' he said, 'let's share it!'

Reja looked around and stood up.

Soon the two friends parted and became shadows against the distant backdrop of the settlement.

. . .

Reja and Shankar had been to the same school from their very childhood. They might belong to two different religious camps, but none would dispute that they had one soul and one body. Not a day could they live without seeing each other. At the slightest sign of Shankar's illness, Reja came running to the Hindu hamlet. Unable to go inside, he would content himself by looking at Shankar through the window facing his backyard.

Shankar was no different in his behaviour. He might take the mandatory bath after touching a Muslim, but the slightest of Reja's discomfort brought him running to the latter's house.

Children of two hostile camps, their souls were tied by a single thread of love. Their simple hearts could never harbour hatred.

. . .

It was getting dark. As Reja was emerging with a ripe papaya, Sardar Mohammed Khan called out his name. Reja had never heard his father call him in such a solemn voice. Slowly, the child came and stood before his father. 'Where are you off to?' asked the Sardar.

'To meet Shankar!'

The Sardar's face became grave. 'To Shankar. I see!' he exclaimed. 'Listen, my son, from today onwards you are not to mix with that Hindu boy! Understood? And if you insist, you will have to face the consequences. Be sure of that! Now get back to the house!'

Reja felt stunned. This was too sudden, too unexpected. His eyes filled with tears. The only son, he had always enjoyed a special place in the heart of his father. But why was he rebuked for no reason today? Why was he being asked not to meet Shankar? What was his fault? Despite his efforts, he failed to find a reasonable answer. He took a good look at the papaya that he had concealed inside his dress. Then he threw it off to the side of the fence. The papaya dashed against the fence; its broken pieces scattered on the ground.

As he kept gazing at the pathetic sight, unaware of himself, tears rolled down from Reja's eyes.

. . .

Reja felt stifled. He was very much under the custody of his father these days. Once or twice, he had come hiding from the mosque, but he had to return disappointed. The Sardar was mad at him. Such a grown-up kid! What a shame, he could never abide by norms and respect his community!

Reja saw the gatherings in his house gradually swell and he felt frightened. At times, he asked his father the reason for keeping out Shankar. Some of his Muslim friends jeered at him, 'You must be dumb!' They remarked. 'Haven't you realized this by now! We must teach the Hindu *kafirs* a fitting lesson! Our party is insulted by Congress! And still you wish to meet the Hindu brat! Want to be friendly with our enemy?'

All this made no sense to Reja. What, after all, did Shankar have to do with the League and the Congress? It was enough that he and Shankar could mix, play, and steal fruits together. What did it have to do with the Hindu–Muslim question? Reja's mind was getting confused.

The next day it was *Durga Saptami*, the seventh day before the *Durga Puja*. It was perhaps a lull before the storm! In a room in the Sardar's

house were huddled many people. Reja craned has ears. He was startled as he heard the voice of his cousin. 'We must set fire to the first house in the Hindu settlement!'

'The first house!' thought Reja. 'Didn't it belong to Shankar? Arson at the dead of night! What a thought! Shankar would be burnt to death!' A tremor of rage shot through his heart. 'No, he would never allow such a thing to happen! Never!'

The *Durga Saptami* day finally arrived. Everyone was in a festive mood. However, there was no smile on Shankar's face. Every year on the day of the *puja*, he stole the *prasad* from the deity as Reja would sit, waiting patiently, on the bridge. He loved the taste of the delicious *prasad*. But such times were nearly over!

Shankar felt a sense of disquiet. 'Why don't you go to the *puja*?' urged his aunt. 'Why do you sit still at home?'

'Not now, later!' said Shankar listlessly as he lay down on the bed.

The night grew. The noise and bustle of daytime gradually subsided. There was a pregnant silence all around, a sense of menace in the air. Like ghosts, the assailants moved swiftly and silently towards the bridge, armed with *lathis*, *mashals*, and knives. Reja woke up with a start. Keeping awake throughout the day, the poor thing had dozed off. He sensed the aggressive mood of the mob and was scared to death. What would happen to Shankar and his hut? He could not think anymore.

Getting up, he ran on breathlessly. By now, everyone in the Hindu settlement had been alerted. With whatever they could lay their hands on, they rushed towards the bridge. Amidst all the commotion, Shankar heard the ominous cry that today they would burn the son of the Sardar and avenge the insult.

Soon the silence of the night was shattered. On both sides gathered the mobs hurling a volley of slogans: *Jai Hind*! *Pakistan Zindabad*! Some among the Hindus had gone and broken off parts of the bridge. This did not deter the rivals from advancing. Amidst the turmoil, one heard the cry: 'Shankar *bhai*! Shankar!' It was Reja, the son of the Sardar.

In the faint glow of the *mashal*, Shankar stood at the head of his men and faced Reja. Two of the Hindu youth emerged with *lathis*. Were they going to kill Reja?

'Reja, Reja, step back!' urged Shankar in a fearful voice. The mobs faced each other. Eyeball to eyeball! Unmindful, the two friends approached each other. The crowd stood still. Two cries were heard: 'Reja!' 'Shankar!' Two palms came together and then there followed a mighty splash as two bodies tumbled into the dark waters.

It seemed like a heavenly union. The souls of the two boys were united forever. The tender flower buds floated inexorably into the mouth of the mighty flood.

'Shankar, Shankar dear, where are you?' The plaintive cry of the Hindu widow shook the elements. The woman collapsed on the ground where Shankar and Reja had dropped. 'You murderers! You have killed my dear Shankar!' she wailed uncontrollably. 'My dear, my darling!' A few burly youth approached the Sardar, 'Shall we finish off this old hag?' they yelled, their *lathis* poised to strike.

'No!' came the firm reply. 'Go back to the village!'

Strange. There were tears in the Sardar's eye. His dear Reja was no more. The mobs eyed each other and slowly retraced their footsteps. It was the Sardar who stood alone. His glace fell longingly on the swirling waters beneath his feet. He slowly moved his eyes away and headed back to the village.

(Translated from the Oriya by Sachidananda Mohanty. From *Shankha*, Summer, 1947, pp. 702–5)

18

||Hemalata Mansingh||

1919–2004

The well-known spouse of Mayadhar Mansingh, eminent Oriya poet and critic, Hemalata Mansingh has been acclaimed as a short story writer. The present narrative is an interesting experiment, a study in humour. The tale encapsulates the anguish of the poet's life as seen through the eye of the poet's spouse, while underlining her lack of sympathy with the male dominated society.

'Sedina Au Edina'

Those Days and These Days

A small village. Palm, mango, drumstick, *kaniara, bakula, kiya, ketaki.* Many such useful and useless small and big trees surround the village. From a distance, it is extremely pleasant to gaze at the huts surrounded by trees. In the village there are three or four wells. And on the outskirts a lotus pond.

Kavi, the poet, lives in this village. Quite distant from the city. The people are ordinary, mostly semi-literate, and belong to the lower middle class. It is true that talent gets exposed wherever it is. It makes no distinction between the rich and the poor, between the city and the village. But Kavi had not yet become famous. His raw emotions had not yet come to the notice of any discerning eye. No one understood Kavi's poems in the village. They said, 'A good for nothing! Always scribbling something.' Kavi's wife, though not illiterate, had only read up to the village primary school. She brought water, cooked rice and did the innumerable chores of the house. She understood some of Kavi's poems. Some she did not. But she cared for only one thing—Kavi's comfort. She couldn't tolerate even the slightest of Kavi's inconveniences. By nature Kavi was happy-go-lucky. He did not understand loss or gain, needs or demands of his home. Save his father, everyone was angry with Kavi. The son had come of age. How long did they have to go on feeding him! Always writing something. What would we gain from that? Only if he should earn a handful! For this reason Kavi's wife received lukewarm responses from everyone. But because of her diligence, good nature and warmth, not only in the women quarters, but even among the men, her praise was on everyone's lips.

Listening to everyone's harsh words day after day became unbearable to Kavi. Then one day he lost his father. He had already lost his mother in his childhood. Seeing this golden opportunity, his uncle

and aunt separated him from the property. They could not say anything when his father was alive! Now there was no one to stop them. Kavi was left in midstream with his younger brother and two sisters to take care of. One of them was a widow. The other was sent back home because she had not taken any dowry to her in-laws. Kavi did not know anything about being a householder. His wife pacified him and came forward to take care of the responsibilities. If someone was not paying for the share crop, she collected it from him. She sent the pulses so that the chaff could be separated. Sent the labourers to the fields. Had scaffoldings mounted for betel-leaf plantation, and so on.

Even then it wasn't enough. One day Kavi called his wife to him and said, 'In the village people are saying all sorts of things about me. How long will this go on? You keep toiling and I only watch! This isn't right. I will go to the town and try to find some means of livelihood. I hear that people build houses by writing books. Here we aren't even able to put a thatch on our mud hut.'

'We will manage. Why worry? This year was bad. Once you have sent your sister back, who will feed you? Where will you go? What will you eat?' She worried. How can one remain pure and travel to foreign lands? However, Kavi was insistent and set out. His wife pawned her beaded necklace and brought ten rupees. She begged him to take his food on time. It seemed to her that in cities people were out to cheat. 'Won't you be careful? Someone might steal your manuscripts.' She wiped her eyes. And looked unblinkingly until Kavi was lost behind the banyan tree at the end of the village. Then she offered an evening lamp to the gods. 'Let him come back safely. It doesn't matter if he makes any money or not.'

Kavi arrived in the city. Visited all the eminent people he knew of, and gave his poetry manuscripts for their comments. His heart was beating loudly. What will they say! Good or bad. Why did I come here unnecessarily?

Kavi had the smell of the country on his body. The shirt made by the country tailor was out of fashion. His pair of shoes was old fashioned. In the city that style was long out and many new ones had come in. The collars of his shirt were crumpled. His bumpkin-like looks became the object of curious stares. Nevertheless Kavi received a lot of letters of praise. But no one said anything about publishing his books. He also did not have the courage to ask. Finally, he went to the editor of a monthly magazine. The editor stared at his dress and said, 'Everyday we get piles of manuscripts. Anyway, you can leave yours.'

Kavi left one, of which he had no duplicate, there—one which he felt was very good. He never got it back. Here also he couldn't ask about money. From there he went to the press. He found that manager *Babu* was not there. When his eyes dried up from waiting, manager *Babu* arrived. He said, 'We have no objections. But we will print only if you pay.' Kavi kept silent. Guessing the reason the manager said, 'Find a publisher. Then it will be easy for you.'

Dejected, Kavi went to a publisher. The publisher examined the writings and found that they were poems. Not stories or novels. He needed pulp fiction or stories. Only if the book sold in large numbers would he make a profit. And Kavi was a new writer. Will the book sell—how can he print without thinking carefully? Why should he take unnecessary risk? In a mocking gesture, he casually flung back the notebook and said, 'Try elsewhere. We have lots of manuscripts. Haven't published them yet. Come later. We shall see.'

Kavi felt bitter. His body was tired from running around. No regularity of food. Whatever he ate, it was at hotels. Does that fill the belly? Carrying the regret of failure and hopelessness, Kavi remembered his home. Before eight days were over Kavi was back at home. On coming back, on seeing his Laxmi, all his weariness disappeared.

Laxmi hurriedly gave him some water to wash his feet, and quickly served lunch, some fries, ghee, coconut, whatever there was at home. Kavi took his food with utmost bliss and started recounting his adventure in the city. But where does she have time to listen to all that? So many things to be done. Time was pressing her. Unless she made arrangements for food, what would she serve for dinner? Asking him to tell her the rest of the story at night, she hurried about her household work.

That night Kavi waited impatiently for that exclusive time for talk. On other nights Kavi would have been in deep sleep by then. Deep in the night, pacing up and down, he would find his wife in the land of dreams.

'So finally your work is over?' Kavi said petulantly.

'You aren't asleep yet?' Said his wife, smiling softly.

'I have been waiting for you. Can the he-bird live without his consort?'

His wife was impatient to hear his story. She said, 'Leave alone your sarcasm. Tell me what happened?'

'What else? Eminent critics and writers have written many words of praise. It's all there. Bring it and read.'

She read: 'If you start reading the poems of this young poet, you cannot stop until you have come to the end. The emotions of his simple heart flow like a river. His future is bright. With dedication, one day he can become a big writer. Let nectar pour on his stylus.'—Pundit Gopabandhu Dash.

Kavi's wife read a few more reviews and praises. His success gave her even greater pleasure than it did to him. Then she asked, 'What about a job? Everyone is pestering me since the day you left. Everyone keeps asking.'

'Oh, I had forgotten all about that. This time I have established acquaintance. Next time I think I will get a job. Once a book has been published, no more worries. If the cost of one book is one rupee, for one thousand books one will get a thousand rupees. You won't have to work so hard. This is how many writers in the city have become rich. Even if there is no money, at least people will read. Unless I publish, how will that happen? Can you arrange some money? Say a hundred or two hundred? Unless you try nothing can be done.' Saying this, Kavi caressed his wife's chin tenderly.

'OK. I will try. Dami's mother, Dami *Bou* has lots of money. But she is very greedy and shrewd. Will want me to pawn something. On top of that will take 2 per cent interest on every rupee.'

'How strange! How come you are here?' Dami *Bou* asked. Kavi's widowed sister, Suma, answered shyly, 'Nothing really. Just thought that I would come and see you. Also did have some little work.'

While cutting betel-nut, Dami *Bou* half-smiled and said, 'Let's see here—what work?' Dami *Bou* was very angry with Kavi's family. They never came to her place. She thought, they would at least come for money at the funeral of Kavi's father. Instead of doing it formally, they somehow managed the ceremony within their small means. That's why the other day, at the bathing site at the pond, she had told Hara *bou* so that Kavi's wife could hear, 'So what! That old man had earned for his family. Shouldn't he have brought decent food and given a feast for the funeral. The same sweet-meat, ripe banana, curd and flattened rice! What about Rama Sahoo? Isn't he also poor! But then he brought sweets and *puries* from Cuttack town—and what was that other thing?—*Rajabhog* or *Rajbhog* something like that—didn't he make arrangements for thirty or forty people? No money—has anything ever stopped or will stop for the lack of money? If he had asked for money, wouldn't someone in this village have lent some? Isn't your work also our work?'

Hara *bou* nodded her head, smiled and said, 'What else if not that? If one had asked Dami *bou*, she would have counted out some hundreds immediately.'

'What's that you are saying, sister? Where from will I get so much money?' Dami *bou* said to Suma.

Suma said, 'Nothing really. My sister-in law sent me to get eight score rupees from you.' Slyly Dami *bou* squinted to see what Suma was holding beneath her saree end. Her greedy eyes fell on it. 'No, my daughter. From where will I get money? Sit down. Why are you standing?'

Suma said, 'No, aunty. Please don't say no. My sister-in-law has asked me to plead with you. Please give it. Won't she repay you back with interest in a month or two?' With a show of reluctance, Dami *bou* brought the money out of her chest. Actually, Kavi's wife's gold bracelets were very much to her liking. If by God's grace she doesn't manage to free them, Dami *bou* would give them to her daughter. Very heavy! She weighed them and said, 'Why, they seem pretty light? Do they have sealing wax inside?'

'Oh, no! They are solid gold from her father's house. Would she have given them! Brother has some urgent official work. Because of dire need only did she part with them!'

'Hey, listen, friend. One hardly sees you,' said Kavi to his wife. 'Won't you come here?' Kavi's beloved, Laxmi, came out with soft footsteps, rubbing the border of her saree between her fingers, with a soft smile on her lips.

'You are always calling me. How will my household work get done?' Kavi said, 'So what, there are so many people. Can't they manage without you? Ask Suma to do it.'

'Shame! How can I ask her to work? If I hurt her feelings? As it is, her fate is bad. She will work and I will sit? Won't it look bad?'

'All right. Just listen to these few lines. They came to my mind and I wrote them down. Tell me how they sound.'

The passage contained a description of the frolic play of the village women and girls in water. Laxmi felt very shy. She said, 'You are always at home. How do you know so many things?'

'What you can't see with your eyes, we see with our imagination. Tell me honestly, don't you splash around in water? Don't you hide one another's clothes? And don't you gossip about your lovers? Hey, where are you off to? Sit down.' He caught hold of her saree and pulled her back. 'Unless you listen, what's the fun in writing?'

'I will listen to all that later. Now I must go.' Looking cautiously all around to see if anybody had seen them, she snatched her saree from her husband and rushed away.

After fifteen long years ...

Many things have turned upside down in the world. The poor poet, Kavi, of the old days, is no longer poor. Along with the increase in the number of schools and colleges, the number of readers has also grown. Writer's value has also gone up. For each writing now he receives twenty to twenty-five rupees. Kavi's *Jharamukula*, *Bhagna Veena*, *Utpala*, *Pallikona*, and many other such books have come out. Of course, initially it took a long time to sell the books after publishing them. In spite of all the taunts and harsh words of Dami *bou*, Kavi's wife had not been able to repay the loan. Along with other things, she could never get back her gold bracelets. Although Dami *bou* acted as if she wanted to give them back.

Now books sell as if on fire. Publishers come and on their own give hundreds of rupees as advance. For his books publishers now fight. With the flow of money, Kavi has also changed. He now lives in the town. No end to meetings and seminars, request after request for his writings. Where does he have time for a few words with his wife?

Kavi's wife, Laxmi, holds the window bars and stares into the distant horizon, where the earth and the sky meet. Before her eyes come those images of village women going out for water. Suli comes and calls, 'Have you already brought water today, sister-in-law?' Sulochana's husband's name is Pranakrushna. People call him Panua. Instead of saying 'water' in colloquial Oriya, he uses the Sanskritized word. 'Wait a moment, friend. I will be there in a moment. Guests had come. By the time they left it was already late.' Walking among the deep shrubs of the countryside they go for water.

'There must be so many lotus in the lotus pond! Monsoon time. *Bhalukuni* fast and *puja* days—girls must be full of excitement, frolicking at the pond. Come. We will deck the goddess with care. Put *alpana* before her. Cut lotus stems for decoration.'

The other one pauses and says, 'Unless you go aunty, it will not do. Everything will be ruined. If the decoration of the upper street is better than ours, everyone will say, shame, shame. What humiliation!' The young girls surround her. Someone calls her aunty, someone says sister-in-law. She drops her work and goes with them. Is never able to say no.

That day, it is the gathering of women and girls. *Kaniara*, lily, *godibana*, *dasakeranta*—threading of flowers to make garlands. Along with that

jokes and laughter. Somebody has pinched the girl who just got married and has come home for the first time at *Khudurkuni* festival. Someone pushes her saying, 'Reminded of your husband? Why are you sitting like that with a long face?' Meanwhile she is dying of shame. With tears in her eyes, she says, 'Look sister-in-law, see how Seba is after me!' Laxmi tells Seba, 'Why are you after her? Let her think of her husband. Promise by me that you will not think of your husband.' 'What's this, you are now after me? Won't allow me to even joke? You will never grow up.'

In the town she is in exile. The one for whom she came, the one for whom she made her home is far far away. Now there is no lack of wealth. She would serve him his favourite food, cook twelve different dishes, this was her dream. But now there are servants and cooks. Tastes have changed. Kavi no longer likes her cooking. He no longer asks for her at mealtime. When he used to search for her, she had no time. Today she has endless time. Without work how will she spend her leisure?

Kavi's wife overhears, 'Your wife is rather rustic, isn't that so? That's why you never take her out with you?' The sound of laughter floats down to her.

Women in elegant gold-bordered dress, with shining shoes, come to see Kavi's wife, to quench their curiosity. Kavi feels ashamed. Before they can converse with her, he takes them away. She overhears, 'What can you write inspired by her?'

'You have seen for yourself! There would be no regret if she were like you.' Kavi tells the cultured lady.

Kavi understands the pain in every heart. But can never open his mouth and say anything. All that pain, intensified, stays within.

A pond surrounded by coconut trees. The swishing sound of bamboo among wind. Today her heart seeks that carefree life of the village. She doesn't want the felicity of *pukka* house. This is the town. She is rustic. Where is place for her soul here?

In her eyes drops of water! The horizon is lost somewhere!

(Translated from the Oriya by Priyadarshi Pattnaik and Arundhati Patnaik. From *Navabharata*, No. 1/8, *Brusa* 1355, 1947, pp. 374–80)

19

|| Basanta Kumari Pattanaik ||

1923–

Eminent novelist, Basanta Kumari Pattanaik was a classmate of Bidyut Prabha Devi, and distinguished herself primarily in fiction. After obtaining her MA in Economics from Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, she helped her brother in setting up a publishing firm called Shanti Nibas Bani Mandira which functioned from 1959 to 1962.

Basanta Kumari's notable short story collections include *Sabhyatara Saja* (1950), *Palata Dheu* (1952), *Jibana Chinha* (1959). She wrote acclaimed novels like *Amada Bata* (1950), *Chorabali* (1973), and *Alibha Chita*; two poetry collections: *Chitanala* (1956) and *Taranga* (1957) as well as two plays entitled *Juara Bhatta* (1952) and *Mruga Trushna* (1956). *Amada Bata* has been made into a memorable film and remains an Oriya classic, both in Oriya fiction and cinema.

Basanta Kumari Pattanaik is the first Oriya woman writer to receive the 'Atibadi Puraskar', the highest award of the Orissa Sahitya Akademi.

From *Amada Bata*

The Untrodden Path

Maya's mother-in-law was ill, suffering from an ulcer. No longer did she go to the prayer room as before, early in the morning to offer her *puja*. For almost a year, she had had this ulcer, and now it had got worse. She lay bed-ridden of late oppressed by a new fear. Whenever she felt the need to, she would call Maya and offer her advice, 'My husband was an only child. Shashi is my only child too.'

'You are bound to him. My days are almost done; soon I shall die and disappear. You people will take care of this house.'

Maya listened to her, consoled her. Her mother-in-law told her the same thing over and over again, as if only to provoke the same words of consolation. However old one is, however complicated one's illness, one never wants to die.

Maya's mother-in-law had started listening to the *Bhagabata* after she took to her bed. She believed she would attain salvation if she kept listening to the *Bhagabata* during her dying moments. Her son had no time to recite it to her. So whenever Maya found time, in the morning or in the evening, she would read it aloud. Her mother-in-law was amazed to see Maya nursing her with such devotion, even to the point of neglecting herself. She was the same daughter-in-law about whom she had never spoken a word of praise or appreciation; she had never imagined Maya would take such great care of her.

Shashibhusan was perturbed to see his mother's condition worsen. The doctor said he would prescribe medicine only after receiving the x-ray report. Shashibhusan had no money, but the treatment had to go on. He found everything around him dark.

It was evening, Maya was returning after lighting a lamp before the *tulshi* altar when Shashibhusan called to her.

Maya looked back. Shashibhusan stood behind her.

'There's no more money, Maya. There's no hope of getting a loan. Everyone has refused!' There was a note of desperation in his voice.

'Where did you get the money you've spent so far?'

'That was also borrowed. I got three hundred rupees from Ram babu after pledging a plot of land. He has no confidence in us. So there's no hope of getting any more from him.'

The light of day was fading; darkness was advancing steadily. Although they could not see each other's face in the semi-darkness of the twilight hour, they could understand the language of each other's heart. The candle, a little distance away, suddenly flickered and burnt out. Maya heaved a sigh.

'What will we do? The treatment isn't finished....' Shashibhusan looked into Maya's face.

'Will you accept money from me?' Maya said, returning his look.

Taken aback, Shashibhusan asked, 'What did you say?'

'When you need money, why do you ask others without telling me?'

'Where will you get money?'

Shashibhusan became gravely serious at the mention of money. In their poverty stricken life, Maya's ornaments were their only wealth. Would he have to take them? Did he have the right to sell them?

At that moment, Maya's mother-in-law's voice could be heard. She was calling Maya to come and read the *Bhagabata*. Maya hurriedly left and Shashibhusan moved around the *tulshi* altar absentmindedly.

Early next morning, Maya opened the box containing her ornaments, looking at each of them. The past floated before her eyes. Of the four thousand rupees received at the time of marriage, two thousand had been spent to repay a loan, and the other two thousand to buy land. She had heard both praise and blame for these ornaments. Today, they would be used for a different purpose. Everyone wanted ornaments for their value. If they were equal to a basketful of earth, who would wear them?

Seeing two large necklaces in Maya's hand, Shashibhusan stood stupefied. 'Aren't you sad?' he asked.

'I will give these away. Whey should I keep them? Am I going to marry again?'

'But I'll never be able to get them back for you again.'

'I know that, ' Maya smiled.

'What do you know?' Shashibhusan looked at Maya suspiciously.

'I know your income is low,' Maya was still smiling.

Shashibhusan's ego was hurt. He said, 'Oh! That's why you are showing me mercy! No, I don't need these ornaments.'

'I am not giving them to you. They're for mother. You have to take them.' Leaving the box there, Maya went out of the room.

Holding the two necklaces in his hand, Shashibhusan took a deep breath.

At noontime, after finishing the household chores, Maya was going to take rest when the servant brought her two letters.

The first was from Kaberi; her new address was written on the cover. She looked at the address again and opened the letter. Four pages—how she had to work hard without rest; how she remembered her in-laws; and finally, how ill luck had separated her from her dear ones, etc. Maya laughed to herself at the flashes of literature and philosophy in the letter.

She hurriedly opened the other letter. Her brother Pratap had written: 'Father is seriously ill. He wants to see you. Mother is crying ...' Maya could not finish the letter. Tears welled from her eyes and blurred the words. She remained seated, holding the letter. Her tears made the ink of the letter run, but she was not conscious of that.

Pitamber *babu's* face appeared before her eyes. It was as if he was opening his eyes only to see her.

As if Pitambar *babu's* voice was heard above the groans of her mother-in-law in the adjoining room, 'Maya, Maya, I won't live long ... come soon!'

Maya got up in a hurry and like a mad woman moved aimlessly about the house. She would have to go. Pitamber *babu* would be waiting for her. Who would nurse him if she did not go? All the words and actions of Pitamber *babu* flashed before her one by one, like scenes in a movie. Presently, she heard the groans of her mother-in-law in the adjoining room. She realized that a patient lay there, too. What could she do? She felt as if she were suffocating; she felt as if all of them were trying to throttle her. With a muffled groan, Maya sat down on the bed. She had left her father's house; now she would only be a guest there. They might depend on her outwardly, but they were no longer her family. Her in-laws' house was her house now. Her mother-in-law was ill. She had brought her, a daughter-in-law, in the hope that she would take care of her during her last days. How could she leave her at a time like this?

And her father's house—was it not also her house? She had grown up there along with her brothers. Father must be searching for her, dying for her. If she did not go, wouldn't there be anguish in his mind, in mother's mind, and in her own mind too? No, she would go. Her first duty was to her father.

On hearing her mother-in-law's feeble voice, Maya stepped in. 'Stay seated her, my daughter. This life could end at anytime... Do I have the strength to call you, to speak to you?'

Tears flowed down Maya's eyes. She did not find it easy, although she was trying to fulfil her duty. There were bonds on both sides, and she would have to sever one of them. Which one would she sever? Which was more important to her?

(Translated from the Oriya by Arun K. Mohanty. From *Amada Bata,* Cuttack: Gitanjali Press, 1981, pp. 1–39, first published 1951)

20

||Bidyut Prabha Devi||

1926–1977

Born as the second daughter of Nimai Charan Das, a well-known writer/compiler, and Rekha Devi, Bidyut Prabha was greatly enamoured by the natural beauty of her parental village, Natra, in Kendrapada district of Orissa. This had an early impact on her writings.

In the village she taught herself grammar, vocabulary, poetic idiom and diction. Later she studied at the Ravenshaw Girls' School till Class IX. Receiving early inspiration from her father's colleague, Krushna Chandra Kar and other mentors such as Radha Mohan Gadnayak and Mayadhar Mansingh, Bidyut Prabha began her poetic writing from 1940 onwards. She taught herself Bengali and English. With her elder sister Basanti she published her first collection *Sabita* (1944). Then followed *Marichika* (1948), *Utkala Saraswata Pratibha* (1946), *Kanakanjali* (1948), *Bihayasi* (1949), *Bandanika* (1950), *Swapnadeepa* (1951), *Jharashiuli* (1952), *Jahakujie* (1953), and *Sanchayana* (1953).

In 1949, Bidyut Prabha was married to Panchanan Mohanty of Agarapada in the district of Bhadrak/Balasore. From her spouse she received a great deal of support in her poetic career and life. She is one of the first to write the poetry of married love in Orissa. We see this depicted vividly in *Jhara Sheuli* (1951) and *Swapnadeepa* (1953) in particular.

After she became a mother in 1952, Bidyut Prabha wrote children's poetry. She continued to write such poetry in later years too. Much of this was acclaimed: *Mo Penkali Bajei De* (1960), *Gachha Patara* (1961), *Kahinki Tume* (1963), *Padhutha Hasi Hasi Gadutha* (1966).

Bidyut Prabha's health broke down in 1966 and she continued to suffer from poor health in later years. In early 1960s, she came in contact with the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and followed the path of Integral Yoga. As a result of this new turn in her life, she started writing devotional poetry in the early 1970s such as *Pushpanjali*, *Jyotishikha*, *Surjyamukhi*, and *Mati Pani Pabana*. She also wrote a novella called *Nishwa Jagata* and a play called *Bibaha*. She had an untimely death in 1977 after prolonged illness.

Given her tragic life and outstanding romantic poetry, Bidyut Prabha is often compared to the legendary Kuntala Kumari of Orissa. She received an award for children's literature in 1955 from the Government of India. In 1962, her poetry collection *Sanchayana* won the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award. Her collected works were later published in 1983. She remains one of the best Oriya women poets of the pre-modern period and one of the finest writers of Oriya literature.

'Pratighat'

The Assault

The grinding is half done.
Where are you,
eldest daughter-in-law?
Unmindful of chores
that lie piled up
until nightfall!

'Am I a bonded labourer?
Am I to be sold daily
Only for this house?
Work, work and more work!
From morning till night!
Tell me,
Is there nothing else
To life?'

Is the life of a woman
meant only for childbirth?
Only for drudgery and fuel?
There is no joy
in holding a pen,
and no pleasure
in its abandonment.

Writing is the greatest
elixir of all.
Whoever has savoured it,
can she escape its lure?
Never mind the many pitfalls
on the way.

Our life a constant turmoil.
The soul, consumed forever
with disease and death.

How can there by in all this,
time for poetry?

Today, it's the son's health.
And tomorrow, it's
the daughter's stomach ailment!
Can there be
amidst all this,
the meeting of pen and ink?
Writing, I know
cannot fetch me
food and clothing.
Nothing in it
to interest the family.
It remains
despite this
my pleasure, my cynosure!

Let people say what they like.
I shall go on flowing,
Like the mighty river,
I shall cross
whatever comes my way
with a smile
forever on my lips.

Writing is the balm
for all my pain.
It's the glory of my sorrow.
Writing is rain-soaked woods.
It's the music of cloudbursts
during the month of *Shravana*!

I wish I could speak of
the joy that gathers in my heart.
Like a flame
in the mouth of storm,
my poetry
a luminous lamp!

(Translated from the Oriya by Sachidananda Mohanty. From *Bidyut Prabha Granthabali*, Cuttack: Friends' Publishers, 1983)

'Bilasi Kabi'

The Romantic Poet

Ah, romantic poet,
you wandered
far and wide.
You went beyond
the land of dreams.
And yet,
not once
did your gaze
rest upon
reality.

You saw much.
In the womb of the earth
you glimpsed
the naked smile
of the moonbeams,
In the lips of the sun
you saw,
the courtship
of *madhabi* flowers.

Laden by sleep
in the magical world
of dreams,
you lay still,
in the golden palace
bedecked by flowers.

You did not see,
not even once, O poet,
how in the broken hut
the old woman
braved the cruel winter
in the month of *Pousa*.

There is much
that you took in.
Not just the powerful
and intoxicating
winds.
But did you ever hear
the sigh
of the *badhuli* flowers?
O romantic poet,
you never rested
your gaze
upon the emptiness
that lay
in the heart of the
forsaken woman.

You saw for long
The face of the green grass
bathed by dew.
But did you ever see
the flood of tears
of a thousand eyes?

You travelled O poet
the seven seas.
And crossed
thirteen rivers.
And everywhere
you saw
the picture of luxury.

What good is it
to luxuriate
in the world of dreams,
if your pen cannot inscribe
the sad song
that lies
in the heart
of things?

(Translated from the Oriya by Sachidananda Mohanty. From *Bidyut Prabha Granthabali*, Cuttack: Friends' Publishers, 1983)

21

||Nandini Panigrahi (Satpathy)||

1931–

Daughter of the distinguished Oriya poet and novelist, Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, Nandini was born in 1931 at Cuttack, Orissa. After her early education at the Ravenshaw Girls' School, she did her post graduation in Oriya language and literature at the Ravenshaw College. From her childhood, she was deeply influenced by her father's sense of idealism and uncle Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi's progressive philosophy. She participated wholeheartedly in the freedom struggle. She was a member of parliament (1962–68), deputy minister, Information and Broadcasting, Government of India (1966–68) and member, Rajya Sabha (1968–74). She was the chief minister of Orissa in 1972–73 and for the second time during 1974–76.

Nandini has made a mark for herself in the field of literature. She has distinguished herself as a poet, short story writer and translator. An early story of hers, *Anath* (The Orphan) was published in the magazine of Cuttack Training School. Her notable works include: *Ketoti Katha* (1967) (a collection of short stories), *Gandhi Kathamruta*, (a translation of Krishna Kripalini's *All Men Are Brothers*), 'Sapta Darshi' (a short story collection) published in 1998. In 1990, her translation of Amrita Pritam's autobiography entitled *Rasidi Ticket* (in Oriya 'Revenue Ticket') fetched her the Central Sahitya Akademi Award. Later works include the translation of Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* (1993), *Bal Gandhiji* (translation) and *Uttarpurusha* (1998). She has won several awards: the Prajatantra Prachar Samiti, Orissa Sahitya Akademi and Sahitya Bharati. In Debendra Satpathy she found a spouse and companion who shared her ideals in life.

The following story, translated as 'The Call of the Chimney', represents the earlier phase of Nandini's career. It records female literary response to the working class and trade union movement in Orissa, an area totally neglected by researchers so far.

'Chimnira Daka'

The Call of the Chimney

As usual, at the crack of dawn, Siba rose and with his prized sickle set out for the fields. It was a rain-drenched morning of *Shravana*. The breeze blew gently. Layers upon layers of chirping birds flew in the vast sky. A curious tremor of joy passed through the thick foliage. The sun, an orb of vermilion, was a miracle in the east. Siba's gaze went past the playful movement of nature. Clutching his sickle with a firm grip, he walked on, his mud-laced feet ploughing through the field. The paddy saplings seemed engaged in a love play with the zephyr.

Siba's gaze gradually became still. All the laughter, tears, joy, and sorrow of his life seemed to rest upon the tiny patch of the paddy field. His feet slowed down and stopped still in the middle of the field dividers. Pausing for a while, he gazed at Phula. Phula, who was of the nearby hamlet, was kneeling down. The maiden had already begun sifting through the paddy right from the morning.

On her shiny back, which was like the smooth black surface of a block of granite, there was a strand of black hair. Her shapely arms were flung in a spirit of loose abandon. Siba's trance was broken by the sudden cry of Dhania, 'O, Siba, why are you standing here?'

Siba felt embarrassed. Quickly changing the topic, he said, 'Don't you see? I am going to the field. Of course, I have no wish to dirty myself in this terrible weather! But tell me, do we have a choice? Unless we slush through the mud, who would give us a morsel of rice? *Arre bhai*, aren't we born into the family of *Bauris*?' Clearly, there was no time for idle talk.

Soon, Dhania left for work. And Siba entered the fields. Tying the seven-handed Khadi around herself and tucking it skilfully around her waist, Phula said, 'Well, Siba, why are you so late today?'

No answer!

Sticking close to her, Siba knelt down in the middle of the field. Soon amidst endless songs, talk and laughter, the two of them went on sifting the paddy.

Meanwhile, the Sun God rose high in the heaven. Its rays pierced the skin like so many sharp needles. Taking off his headgear, Siba sat down on the divider and let his sweat dry. Covering a big brass bowl with the *anchal* of her saree, Phula came and stood still. His gaze fixed on her, Siba said, 'Phula, why do you suffer so much on my account? Why must you always cook a meal for me? After all, who am I to you?'

In reply, both of them laughed out together. Spontaneously!

. . .

Months passed. One auspicious day, Siba and Phula got united in wedlock.

Mixing salt in the brass vessel laden with rice, Siba said, 'Phula, do you remember what happened the other day in the field?' Phula laughed aloud. Pulling her child close to her chest, she kissed it. Surprised by this unexpected attention, the child began to cry.

While ploughing the field, Siba said, 'Look here, Phula! What is it that you see in the crack between the branches?'

Phula raised her head. 'What is it?' she asked. 'Do you mean there is smoke out there?'

'Yes, indeed!' came the reply. 'Do you know what that is? Well, it's the smoke from the chimney of the new factory that has been set up in the town. So many workers earn their livelihood there. Come, we too should go there.' Phula was surprised. 'No!' she exclaimed, 'What good is that factory to us? We are fine as we are! Such wonderful light and air. Who would give us such a pure world?'

'It does not matter if there is no light or air,' Siba replied. 'There is money for sure! After thrashing through the mud and slush the whole year, we can't fill our stomachs for even four months at a stretch. Then, there is always the tyranny of the *zamindar*. No, we must get going.'

Dhania, Rathia, and Padia—everyone saw that day as Siba Bhoi followed Phula closely with a bundle on his head. Neither the entreaties of friends nor the ripe paddy fields—nothing mattered to him. The land held no attraction for him anymore. He was maddened by the call of the chimney. Possessed, he ran on the strange crowded highway.

Siba found a job in the factory. And so did Phula. Day and night, they toiled. There was no rest for them. Only hard labour, donkey's work! The muscles of Siba's strong arms gradually became slack. His eyeballs seemed to recede inside. One could even count the ribs in his wide chest.

And Phula? Well, her cheekbones became progressively more prominent in her pale face.

Despite work, they could never fill their stomachs. Siba had no more desires. In front of him, he saw hundreds of workers toiling away day and night. Not one of them could satisfy his hunger fully. In their broken thatched house, wide open to the rain, they had absolutely nothing for their sick children, not even medicine.

What then could be the meaning of all this, Siba wondered. What was it that took away all the proceeds? Where did lakhs and lakhs of rupees disappear? Siba got the reply the day the association for the workers was formed. Not just in the factory, he searched for his enemies everywhere. They lay scattered—in the village, among the relations and kinsmen, among crores of workers. In fact, they thronged the world. Nor could he ever keep quiet after sighting them. He knew he must alert his friends to the danger. 'Let's go, Phula,' he said, 'This is no place for us!'

'Are you mad?' asked Phula. 'For ten days, our child has been battling for life. Where can we go in this condition? There has not been a drop of milk or any medicine. Nor can we hope to ever get it!' 'Not just my child. I know that like ours, the children of lakhs of workers will perish one day at the altar of the Master's greed. Today, eighteen of us have been dismissed from service. I am one of them. I have lost my job! No longer do I have a place to live! I must vacate my house!'

Siba slumped against the pillar. His eyeballs had a fiery glow. Drops of rain water continued to fall on the head of the sick child.

Phula stared wide-eyed and silent. After a while, she said, 'Where can we go so late at night, in all this rain! We have toiled for so long. Will our Master not take a little pity on us?'

'The mercy of the Master?' scoffed Siba. 'We don't need it, Phula! Haven't we had enough of it? Come on, there's no time to waste. Let's go.'

With the limp child on his shoulder, Siba proceeded, and holding Phula's hand plunged into the darkness and rain. In a soft, subdued voice, Phula said, 'Shall we never return?'

'Yes, we shall one day. Only after ending the line of the Masters and their Saviours!'

A blast of cold wind from the North drove them to the other pole of the world—into the arms of millions of creatures like Siba.

(Translated from the Oriya by Sachidananda Mohanty. From *Sanket*, Cuttack, 1949)

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